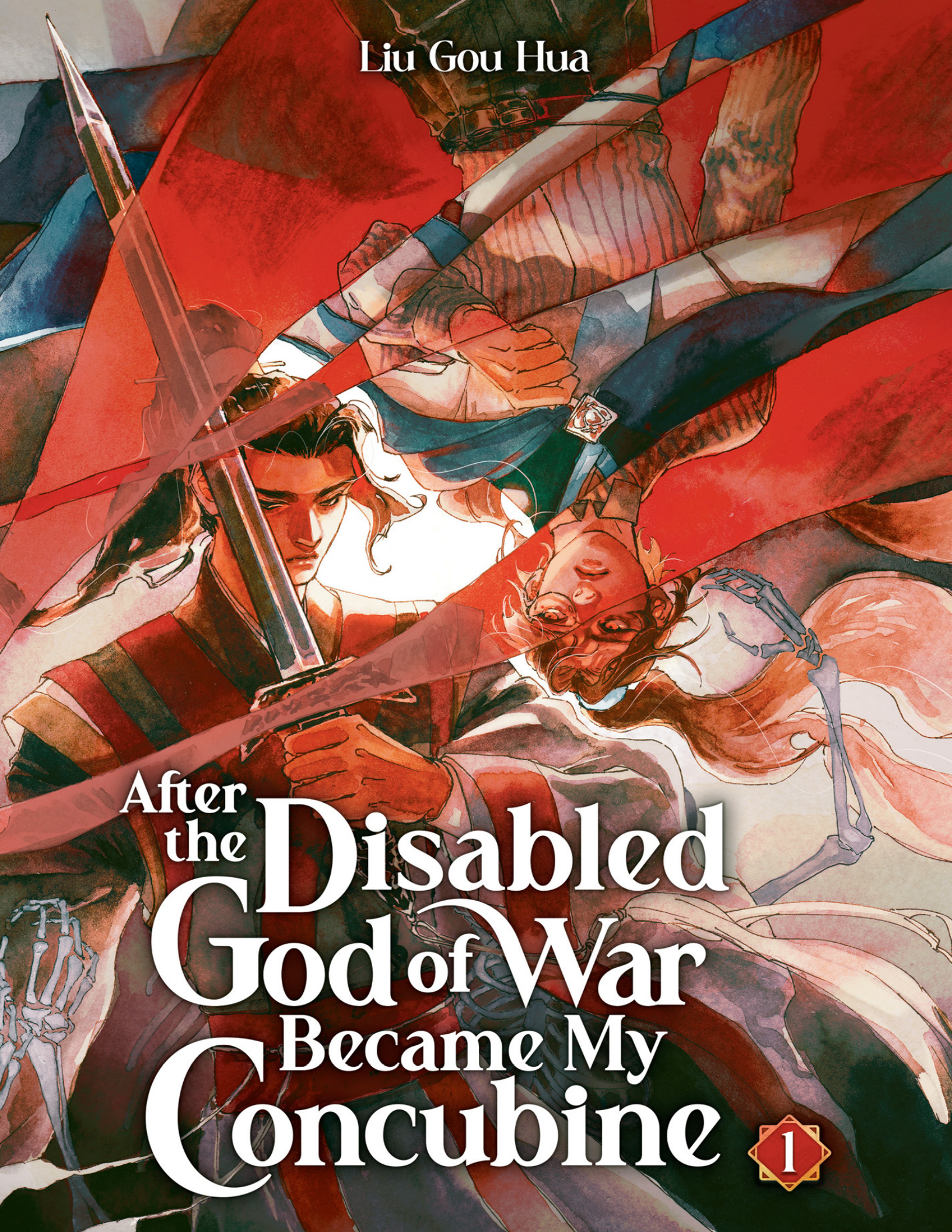




Liu Gou Hua

After
the **Disabled**
God of War
Became My
Concubine

1

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1





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Chapter 1

DARKNESS DESCENDED ACROSS the horizon, and the stars swirled through the sky above Qinghe Ward in Jiangnan.

Earlier in the day, the Prince of Jing's residence there had been thoroughly decorated with red silks and lanterns. Now, as night fell and the lanterns were promptly lit, the street was bathed in a bright red-gold glow. As servants hurried in and out of the front gates, deftly avoiding the thick layer of firecracker debris on the steps, the light imbued them with an air of festive joy.

The early spring breeze toyed with the lanterns, making them sway, and the red candles within flickered. Each one bore a double happiness symbol in celebration of the wedding that would soon take place in the Prince of Jing's residence.

The emperor himself had proclaimed the third day of the second lunisolar month to be an auspicious day. All matters would proceed propitiously on this day, especially marriage.

Frankly, however, the particular qualities of the day didn't matter. What mattered was that the emperor had declared that the Prince of Jing would be married today, regardless of everything else. Even if there were a death in the residence, the coffin would have to be set aside until the bride-to-be was ushered into the household with much fanfare.

The words spoken by the Son of Heaven always carried this inescapable weight.

That held true even after rebel forces stormed the capital, Yecheng, and forced said Son of Heaven to flee south with his tail between his legs a few years prior. He eventually made it to Yuhang, court officials in tow, where he stayed, eking out a meager existence.

Even an emperor who resembled a stray dog was still an emperor in the end. And right now, he was basking in the glory of his recent major victory on the battlefield.

Everyone knew that His Majesty had captured Northern Liang's undefeated General Huo—whose name alone struck fear into the hearts of all who heard it—and had maimed his legs in the process.

It was indeed an achievement worth celebrating, and the emperor felt quite pleased with his accomplishments.

And when happiness spread through Great Jing, the Prince of Jing was swept along with it. The particular sort of “double happiness” that found its way to the prince's front gates on this day, however, did not seem to delight anyone. On the contrary, a deep sorrow hung in the air.

To be fair, the situation was quite unusual. It wasn't uncommon for a captured general to be tortured or killed, but to wrap the general in bridal attire and marry him into the Prince of Jing's household as a concubine... Well, that was something else entirely.

Firecrackers had been going off for the better part of the day, and while the residence was elaborately decorated in anticipation of the event, the atmosphere was heavy. Despite the veneer of festivity and all the hustle and bustle, there wasn't a single smile to be found.

The servants rushed around in silence, heads meekly lowered in an unspoken agreement to hold their tongues.

It wasn't just the servants, though; the mood became increasingly oppressive the deeper into the residence one delved.

It was especially somber in Anyin Hall, the main living quarters of His Highness, the Prince of Jing.

To address his sickly health at birth, a respected monk had chosen the hall's name from the Lotus Sutra—"Anyin" for tranquility. The Prince of Jing's constitution had remained somewhat poor throughout his life to this point, but the fact that he'd been able to survive until now, albeit weakly and feebly, could be partially ascribed to some blessing.

On that night, Anyin Hall was brilliantly lit and yet utterly quiet. One might not guess that wedding preparations were underway there at all. There was no vibrant red silk, no decoration, only candlelight gleaming into the courtyard as night descended. A warm breeze ruffled the tall, century-old birch-leaved pear trees, scattering their white petals haphazardly over the ground.

Maidservants came and went from the courtyard, eyes trained on the floor, afraid to even breathe too loudly. Everyone knew that His Highness was in a rotten mood.

He was quite reticent to begin with, and most people found him to be difficult to read and cold. That he rarely smiled contributed to his overall gloomy atmosphere, which made him seem all the more mysterious and inscrutable.

That was even more so the case today, for obvious reasons.

While it was true that His Highness had cut-sleeve tendencies,¹ he wasn't indiscriminate in his tastes. Why would he ever want an

incapacitated enemy general as his concubine? The man was dangerous, like a caged and wounded beast.

The imperial edict issued by the emperor was outrageously absurd and tantamount to a humiliating slap across the face.

Thus, it was only natural for His Highness to be in a foul mood. It was also quite natural that the servants felt they had no choice but to tread cautiously and take care not to invite misfortune upon themselves, lest they lose their heads.

There was a hush in the room.

Since the “bride-to-be” was a concubine, there was no need for His Highness to personally welcome him. However, the bridal chamber still had to be checked off.

As a result, the Prince of Jing had gotten ready earlier in the day by changing into red-gold wedding robes, his ink-black hair gathered in a jade hairpiece.

He sat on the wooden couch, a book in one hand.

The servants stood nearby, silent but attentive. No one dared disturb him.

A young maidservant tiptoed into the room, head lowered and hands clasped. She did not often attend to matters in here and dared not look around unbidden. She was normally assigned to the courtyard, but her superior had ordered her to go inside and take away the basin of water next to the dressing table. The atmosphere in the courtyard was suffocating enough, and she discovered it was much worse inside.

The room should have been the picture of tranquility and elegance. Fragrant incense burned quietly in a censer, and oil lamps glowed as bright

as day. The furnishings were simple and austere. At the moment, though, the picturesque stillness made it more reminiscent of the netherworld than anything else. She tried her best to not make any noise, and her legs shook with every step, as if she could sense the presence of evil spirits lying in wait.

After bowing silently to His Highness, she swiftly went to pick up the copper basin on the floor.

Unfamiliar with the room's layout, she accidentally knocked the side of the basin against the edge of the dark sandalwood table when she stood. A bit of water sloshed out following the muffled *thunk*.

The sound shattered the deathly stillness.

The young maid's hands trembled, and her entire body tensed. She shot a hasty, terrified look at the prince sitting on the couch. He lifted his eyes and gazed calmly back at her.

Oh, yet how stunning those eyes were—long and narrow, tipped slightly up at the outer corners, almost indolently so. A tiny vermilion mole dotted under one beautiful eye, giving him an air of elegance. His eyelashes were fine and long, his eyebrows a little arched. His appearance was languid yet beguiling, like those androgynous yao² from folklore who ensnared human souls.

It seemed almost as though he could lure away her soul then and there, illuminated by the dancing lamplight as he was.

Those eyes were as enchanting as they were unfathomably dark, and the maid became keenly aware that there was an icy arrogance underscoring them. Her blood ran cold. It was as if he were looking at a dead creature and not a girl.

Her legs gave out from underneath her. As she crumpled to her knees, the copper basin landed on the floor with a *clang*, splashing water everywhere.

Jiang Suizhou gestured stiffly with his hand, indicating for the young girl to take her leave.

She kowtowed to him again and again, as if he had granted her a great pardon for her offense. Scooping up the wet copper basin, she stumbled quickly out of the room.

As Jiang Suizhou watched her flee in panic, confusion swelled inside him.

...Who am I? Am I that terrifying?

But he didn't dare voice those questions. Naturally, nobody could answer them for him either.

The last thing he remembered was closing his laptop after responding to a student's message. His day had been perfectly ordinary, aside from the truly unorthodox thesis he'd received from that student earlier.

For the last several years, Jiang Suizhou had served as a lecturer at J University and had mentored numerous graduating students during that time. He had seen his fair share of odd theses, and he considered himself an old hand and rather good at navigating such situations. He was always calm and even-tempered in front of the students, amiable yet firmly capable of holding his own.

However, this submission was the first time he'd ever had a student from the Department of History base their thesis on something so completely ahistorical. The student wrote as a storyteller, his prose moving and expressive, and the plot a roller coaster of ups and downs.

According to historical record, the Marquis of Dingbei, Huo Wujiu, was the general who founded the Liang dynasty and ordered the destruction of the state of Jing. However, the student's thesis posited an unspeakable motive for these actions: When Huo Wujiu was taken hostage in Southern Jing, he was given to a certain sickly prince to serve as his concubine. The paper went on to explain that there, in the household of the Prince of Jing, the general endured three years of humiliation and developed a deep grudge, which led to his swift vengeance against the state of Jing upon his eventual return to Northern Liang.

This prince was barely mentioned in official records. Listed only by the title conferred to him, the Prince of Jing, he was noted to have died young due to illness. However, the student argued that he had actually perished from unnatural causes related to the aforementioned events.

According to the thesis, he was actually beheaded by the Marquis of Dingbei, who then hung his head from the walls of Lin'an for three full years as retribution for Huo Wujiu's suffering.

Maybe this kid chose the wrong major, Jiang Suizhou thought to himself when he first read it. He should've become a screenwriter instead.

To a historian like Jiang Suizhou, this was tantamount to using *My Fair Princess*³ as a basis to research the Qing dynasty.

And so, Jiang Suizhou gave the paper a thorough, ruthless critique ending with his recommended corrections: scrap the entire thing, change the

topic, rewrite the thesis.

But the student was also quite stubborn.

“Sir, how do you know that those tales weren’t real? How can you call my thesis made-up nonsense? No matter how much history you’ve researched, you’ve never personally witnessed or experienced it!”

Jiang Suizhou had to scoff at that.

So I have to personally experience historical events to study them? Does that mean I’d have to go to the mountains and live like a caveman if I were an archeologist?

He pushed up his glasses and typed a message: “You make a good point, but I stand behind my critique. Rewrite the thesis.”

He fired off that merciless response with a smirk, then closed the laptop and massaged his aching neck.

At that exact moment, his surroundings abruptly went dark.

A power outage, maybe? But everything was pitch-black around him. There wasn’t even a glimmer of light, as there typically would’ve been at night.

Startled, Jiang Suizhou reached out for the power strip on his desk. Before he could even extend his hand, though, the darkness suddenly lifted. Light had returned, but it was unstable and flickering.

Oil lamps illuminated his surroundings with a warm yellow glow, and he realized that he now sat in an unfamiliar room.

The furnishings were all crafted in a classical style, and the exceedingly large room was partitioned with folding screens and display cabinets. Although the furniture was a bit simplistic and lacking in color,

the luster of the pieces gave the room a muted but dignified air of opulence. It seemed like another world entirely, one that radiated a stately, sophisticated beauty. Nearby, seven or eight maidservants waited silently, eyes cast downward in deference. Despite the number of people in the room, it didn't feel crowded at all.

Jiang Suizhou was somewhat stupefied. Was this a hallucination?

He lowered his gaze.

To his surprise, he was clad in a long, bright-red robe with wide sleeves. The silk draped over him with some weight, which spoke to its high quality and meant it must have been quite expensive. A complex pattern of clouds was embroidered on the fabric in golden thread that shimmered faintly under the lamplight.

Based on the style, the robe was from the end of the Jing dynasty, or perhaps the start of the Liang.

He turned an appraising eye to the book in his hand. It was printed in vertical columns that read from right to left, filled with traditional characters in the Song typeface. Judging from the marks left behind by the printing ink, the book was made during the era of woodblock printing.

The low table next to him was carved from fragrant rosewood, and the tea bowl on it... Huh, hadn't he seen that in a museum at some point?

"Late Jing cup with a camellia pattern and sweet-white glaze, found in the tomb of a nobleman."

Jiang Suizhou stared with blank, unfocused eyes at the little cup on the table.

...Where am I? Who am I? Why is an artifact excavated from an ancient nobleman's grave sitting on my table?

It was then that the careless maidservant bumped the basin against the dressing table, drawing his attention.

He looked up, mind still spinning. She appeared to be fairly young, still in her adolescence. Before he could even begin to mull over what to say, the girl immediately dropped to her knees in fright, splashing water all over the floor as she kowtowed over and over.

Jiang Suizhou was even more alarmed than she was but did his best to remain calm. He lifted his hand and gestured for her to be dismissed. The girl fled with the basin in her arms and tears of gratitude brimming in her eyes. A few steps later, she nearly slipped again because of the water under her feet, and she ran headlong into someone who was just entering the room.

“Look at how you’re behaving, all hasty and heedless!” the person reprimanded. “Get out already!”

That was the voice of a eunuch.

Jiang Suizhou glanced up just in time to see said eunuch trot up to him. His features were rather delicate, and there was a smile on his face.

It was a fairly genuine smile, if a bit fawning.

“Your Highness.”

He cupped his hands and bowed to Jiang Suizhou in a practiced manner before he approached and stooped to deliver a report.

“The madam’s sedan chair has already arrived. You mustn’t miss the auspicious window.”

Jiang Suizhou stared at him quietly. Then, with his hands hidden in his sleeves, he gave himself a vicious pinch on the palm.

He couldn't believe that it was possible to just suddenly transmigrate like this. Even worse, he hadn't figured out his identity, and he was already faced with an impending...

Wedding night?

Chapter 2

THE PAIN FROM THE PINCH traveled from his palm to his central nervous system and instantly cleared his mind. Unfortunately, the scene in front of him didn't change in the slightest.

Rather, his gaze seemed to deepen and grow even colder for a moment due to the pain, causing the eunuch to quiver in fear.

It appeared to be true: He had become someone from the past.

That person was presumably a member of the nobility, from the final years of the Jing dynasty. As for the rest... He didn't have the faintest idea.

Well, he knew one more thing: This person was taking in a concubine today. Or rather, *he* was about to take in a concubine, because that person was now him.

And that was all the information that he had. Meanwhile, the eunuch stood in front of him, slightly bowed forward. A huge smile stretched across his face as he waited for Jiang Suizhou to set off for the bridal chamber.

What in the world was going on?!

Jiang Suizhou felt like his head was going to explode. He silently endured his turbulent thoughts, his face frozen and blank.

The eunuch's smile grew a bit strained. Clearly anxious at the delay, he lowered his voice, pivoting to earnest, well-meaning persuasion and consolation.

"Your Highness, your servant knows the depth of your unwillingness," he coaxed in a hushed voice. "Even so, this edict is from

His Majesty himself. As much as you dislike it, you merely have to go through the motions, that's all! Allegedly, the madam has already been incapacitated and deprived of the ability to perform martial arts. There is no danger at all, so you needn't worry."

An odd expression flitted across Jiang Suizhou's face. Did he just say she'd been incapacitated and made unable to fight?

He didn't expect there to be a forced-marriage plotline.

As far as he was aware, the imperial court had been riddled with corruption in the final years of the Jing dynasty, and the emperors had all been naive fools. The last ruler of the Jing dynasty, Emperor You, was particularly incompetent. According to the historical records, he was a notorious womanizer and his self-indulgent behavior made a joke of court affairs and politics. On top of that, he heavily favored his consort kin—most notably his maternal uncle Pang Shao, whom he permitted to wreak havoc.

It just so happened that the Jing dynasty did not exactly have an abundance of heirs. By the time it reached Emperor You's generation, almost all of the other imperial princes had died young. The only one left was the Prince of Jing, who would also soon meet an early demise due to sickness.

Precisely because of this, the Liang dynasty was able to rise like the sun and conquer the state of Jing only a few years after the court fled south.

Jiang Suizhou reached the conclusion that, judging from the circumstances, he'd somehow become a part of this chaotic, depraved imperial court in its death throes.

It was a bitter realization. What kind of terrible deed had he committed to incur the heavens' wrath like this? To be inexplicably ripped

from his comfortable life as a cog in the machine and made to play the part of a nobleman from a dynasty on its last breath?

Was it just because he had been a little too harsh on the student earlier?

Impossible.

At that moment, someone called from outside the room.

“Qianshan-gonggong,⁴ the bridal sedan has already arrived at Yincui Pavilion!” the maidservant said.

“What’s the rush?” the eunuch answered loudly, gritting his teeth.

The maidservant promptly clammed up.

Swiveling his head back around, the eunuch looked at Jiang Suizhou with earnest, pleading eyes.

Jiang Suizhou knew that he had no choice but to play along at this point. He was inevitably going to have to face the issue of the bridal chamber. Whether he chose to go or not, he’d end up in hot water either way. However, since the bride-to-be wasn’t here of her own volition and had even been incapacitated as a result, he felt reasonably confident he’d be able to muddle through the wedding night without much trouble.

Everything else would have to wait until after he struggled through this initial ordeal. Then he could slowly figure out the specifics of his identity and situation and proceed from there.

He made a faint noise of agreement and stood.

The eunuch’s eyes lit up, and he quickly reached forward to lend him a hand.

For some reason Jiang Suizhou felt rather weak and dizzy when he stood. Perhaps he was just imagining things, or maybe his spinning thoughts were disorienting him more than he realized. He had no choice but to rely on the eunuch for support as he stepped down from the platform, though he wasn't used to being waited upon like this.

As he walked, he noticed a full-length bronze mirror nearby. Subtly, he shifted his gaze ever so slightly to catch a glimpse of himself in the reflection.

Unexpectedly, he looked almost exactly as he had in his original body. The only difference was that he seemed to be a couple of years younger; no older than twenty-four or twenty-five.

His students used to say he was handsome, but they always teased that he was good-looking in a villainess way. Jiang Suizhou never agreed with them, but he had to admit he was starting to get the same impression as he gazed at the person in the mirror.

Indeed, he didn't look like a "good person."

His beauty had always been icy, which lent him an air of callousness. The long hair and sweeping sleeves made him seem all the more delicate and aloof. His eyes were piercing, with small irises that revealed just a little too much of the white beneath. A single impassive glance from him was enough to make anyone's stomach drop.

Jiang Suizhou withdrew his gaze, but one last thing caught his eye as he looked away—a dot of vermilion on his left eyelid near the upper outside corner.

He didn't have a mole like that. At least not on his original body.

But before he could examine it more carefully, the eunuch led him past the mirror and out of the room, still supporting him.

Another servant waited in the outer room, prepared with a thin cloak. When Jiang Suizhou drew near, the servant wrapped the cloak around him in one adept movement.

Puzzled, Jiang Suizhou furrowed his brow.

He was already dressed much warmer than everyone else around him. It seemed a bit much to add another layer on top of that.

The eunuch next to him keenly detected the shift in his expression, and he swiftly pacified him.

“The wind is stronger at night. It may be too much for Your Highness, so it’s best to wear a little more.”

Your Highness?

Before Jiang Suizhou could gather his thoughts, he was guided down the steps and toward the palanquin waiting in front of the courtyard.

The wind should have been warm, but it felt cool on his skin. The feeling was quite unlike being forced outside with a cold. He felt an innate deficiency within himself: the indescribable exhaustion caused by a weak immune system.

This new discovery, in connection with the title that the eunuch had just addressed him by, caused an ominous premonition to darken Jiang Suizhou’s thoughts.

The person he had become was a feeble, chronically ill individual who lived at the end of the Jing dynasty and could be referred to as “Your Highness.” He could only think of one candidate.

It had to be none other than His Highness, the Prince of Jing, whose full name had been blotted from the annals of history. The same Prince of Jing who suffered from a congenital abnormality and who ultimately died prematurely.

Servants swiftly helped Jiang Suizhou into the palanquin. As it was lifted into the air, he felt a bit lightheaded.

If history were to run its course, that meant he would soon fall ill and die. He likely had about three to five years left to live.

Even if he somehow didn't die from sickness, Northern Liang would conquer Southern Jing soon after, and they certainly wouldn't hesitate to eliminate the dregs of the previous dynasty.

Jiang Suizhou stared ahead of him in a daze, slowly sinking back into his seat.

Unsurprisingly, he wasn't delighted to discover that he had but a few years left to live. Would anyone be?

Collecting himself, he inclined his head and glanced at the eunuch keeping pace with the palanquin. He decided that he would attempt to confirm his suspicions with him.

What had that servant called him earlier?

"Qianshan," he said.

The eunuch's head jerked up in astonishment when he heard the name leave Jiang Suizhou's mouth, and he looked over at him blankly.

Jiang Suizhou's heart skipped a beat. Had he misspoken?

This could be bad. The eunuch would likely have a razor-sharp mind and wit to match, waiting upon nobility as closely as he did.

Before Jiang Suizhou could fully spiral into worry, the eunuch's face brightened, his lips pulling into a flattered and delighted smile. He looked overjoyed to the point of bewilderment.

"Your Highness, your humble servant is at your service!" With his shining eyes, he was the picture of a puppy wriggling in excitement, tail wagging furiously. "P-perhaps you should just call me by my full name, Meng Qianshan, as you did before..."

Jiang Suizhou went silent.

All right, maybe he was overthinking things. This particular personal attendant didn't seem to be too astute.

Jiang Suizhou calmly looked away and made a noise of acknowledgment.

"When did the bridal sedan arrive at the Prince of Jing's residence?" he asked.

Meng Qianshan didn't notice the probing nature of his question at all. He wholeheartedly believed that His Highness was simply concerned about missing the window of auspiciousness, and he answered without holding anything back.

"Rest assured, Your Highness, Madam Huo has also just arrived. Now is the ideal time for you to head over."

When he didn't say anything to correct the "Prince of Jing's residence," Jiang Suizhou's suspicions were confirmed.

So he really had become that doomed, short-lived prince who barely showed up in the history books.

But...Madam Huo?

He frowned.

This soon-to-be concubine was surnamed Huo?

He couldn't help but recall the content of that student's thesis. It was complete and utter nonsense, and yet this soon-to-be concubine shared so many similarities with that depiction of General Huo. Maimed legs, married into the Prince of Jing's household, and now the surname Huo...

Jiang Suizhou briskly banished that idea.

What was he thinking? Even the trashiest made-for-television drama wouldn't dare to depict that tall tale. It was clearly fabricated in the name of sensationalism; there was absolutely no way that it was true.

Having reaffirmed his doubts, Jiang Suizhou stopped talking. Meng Qianshan, on the other hand, continued chattering the entire way there.

Clearly this somewhat dense subordinate of his must usually be given the cold shoulder. Jiang Suizhou had granted him the smallest moment of kindness due to a combination of odd coincidences, and it made him practically giddy.

It wasn't necessarily bad for Meng Qianshan to be a tad foolish.

Jiang Suizhou felt his heavy heart lift a little as he listened to Meng Qianshan's long-winded prattling. By reading between the lines, he was also able to get a vague picture of the current situation in the residence.

Well, I'm already here. Let's just take it step by step, he thought to himself with a sigh.

Approximately fifteen minutes later, the palanquin came to a stop in front of a courtyard.

Red lanterns were suspended above the entrance to the courtyard, their glow illuminating the firecracker remnants scattered all over the ground.

Through the entrance, Jiang Suizhou could see a sedan chair parked in front of the main building. Quite a few servants were waiting by the front gate, and they all knelt and bowed upon his arrival.

Jiang Suizhou wasn't very accustomed to being paid respects to in this manner, so he lifted a hand and allowed them all to rise.

An elderly woman, seemingly the wedding matron, approached him.

"Congratulations, Your Highness," she said with a smile. "The madam awaits you inside. All Your Highness needs to do is lift the red veil."

Jiang Suizhou hummed in response.

He was familiar with the social customs from the Jing dynasty. The ceremony for marrying a concubine was much simpler than the one for marrying a wife: A small sedan chair was carried into the residence through a side entrance, the husband lifted the bridal veil, they shared wine from linked cups, and then it was over.

He passed through the crowd and made his way toward the main building.

His pace was slow and steady, his expression indifferent. The evening breeze fluttered through his sleeves as he walked. Appearing unperturbed, he had captured the demeanor of a high-ranking nobleman quite well.

But only Jiang Suizhou knew the extent of the panic he was feeling deep inside.

After all, he had just transmigrated into the Jing dynasty for reasons unbeknownst to him. Not only had he turned into a sickly prince with one foot in the grave, he'd been immediately made to go to the bridal chamber and face that poor girl. It was quite a pitiable fate for her, but he wasn't much better off himself.

As that thought crossed his mind, he advanced up the stairs, his steps heavy despite his facade of calm. Finally, he pushed open the front door.

Inside, red canopies danced in the breeze, and the flames of the wedding candles flickered. The maidservants standing on either side of the door beamed joyfully and bowed to him as they offered their congratulations.

One of the servants led him to the inner chamber, where Jiang Suizhou laid eyes upon his bride for the first time.

Amid the exquisite splendor sat a stranger in a wheelchair, their body so tall and strongly built that their legs barely fit within it. Clad in layers of red from head to toe and crowned with a phoenix-embroidered veil, they held themselves upright and proud.

As he approached, the person remained motionless and stiff, the line of their back as straight as an unbreakable spear.

Yes...quite evocative of a long, rigid spear.

Jiang Suizhou halted in place and stared in disbelief. His bride was undoubtedly a man!

A disabled man who had been married off to the Prince of Jing. A man whom he'd heard referred to as "Madam Huo."

It couldn't actually be Huo Wujiu, could it?

As he studied the man, his eyes landed on his hands. They were veiny with clearly defined joints, and though they currently rested quietly atop his knees, there was something dangerous about those hands. Jiang Suizhou couldn't shake the feeling that they were ready to snap a neck at any given moment.

A few paragraphs from that student's thesis suddenly flashed through Jiang Suizhou's mind again.

"...After the Marquis of Dingbei, Huo Wujiu, was taken prisoner, the last emperor of Southern Jing severed the tendons in both of his legs and incapacitated him before marrying him off to the Prince of Jing, who was rumored to be a cut-sleeve, for the purpose of humiliating him. The Marquis of Dingbei endured three years of indignity in the Prince of Jing's residence. Eventually, after numerous and varied attempts, he managed to escape and return to Northern Liang, where he healed his legs.

"Following his subjugation of Jing, he beheaded the Prince of Jing with his own two hands and hung his head over the city gate for three years.

"This is why very little was recorded about the Prince of Jing in the official historical records, and why even his name has been erased from history."

Jiang Suizhou's hands trembled slightly.

If this man truly was Huo Wujiu, then he was looking at the man who would kill the Prince of Jing in three years' time. But it wouldn't be the Prince of Jing, really; it would be him, Jiang Suizhou. Those powerful-looking hands really would get their chance to snap a neck—his.

He examined the person in front of him intently, searching in vain for any hint that would prove the person beneath the bridal attire wasn't a man. But of course, there was nothing, and he was forced to come to an obvious but highly upsetting conclusion. Jiang Suizhou's mind short-circuited a bit trying to process this.

Meng Qianshan, who had been trailing behind him, did not take long to notice when Jiang Suizhou abruptly stopped walking. Upon observing his stony eyes and unreadable expression, Meng Qianshan quickly called out to him in a harsh whisper.

“Your Highness...Your Highness!”

Jiang Suizhou looked over to see Meng Qianshan standing at his side.

“It's time to lift the veil,” the eunuch whispered carefully.

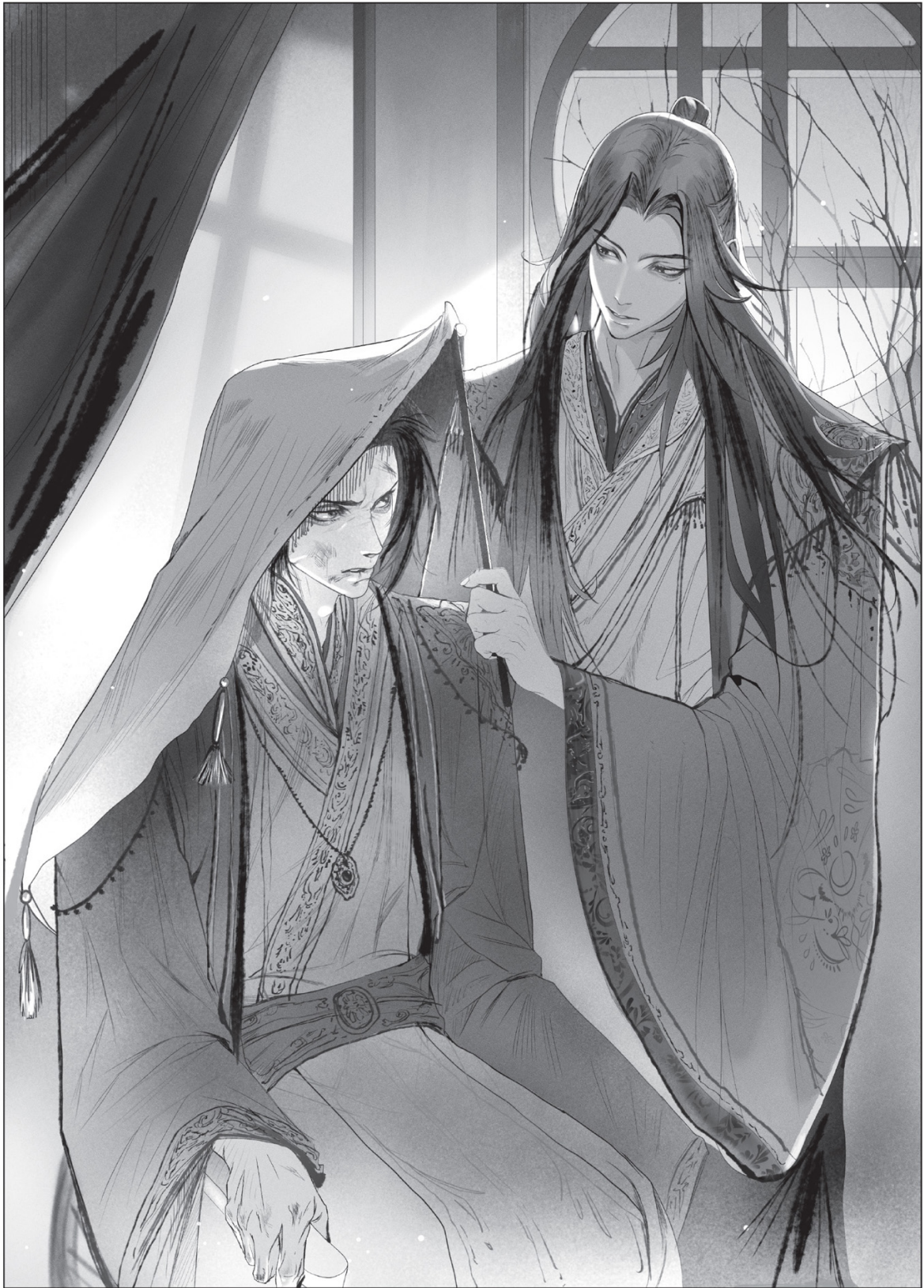
Right, he still had to lift the veil.

How could he be so sure that it was Huo Wujiu without even seeing his face?

Jiang Suizhou forced himself to remain calm as he reached out and lifted the featherlight veil.

The flames of the red candles swayed gently.

Against a backdrop of enchanting red, he met a pair of dark, vicious eyes, chilly in their intensity.



Chapter 3

JIANG SUIZHOU TOOK AN INVOLUNTARY half step back, and the red veil drifted to the floor.

His heart pounded so wildly in his chest that he could even hear the thunderous pulsations in the blood vessels in his ears.

All because of a single look. Nothing more.

The man's eyebrows were sharp and angular, and they were set quite low, which made his gaze seem exceptionally ruthless and menacing. His natural appearance only amplified the murderous aura that he was making no attempt to mask.

In Jiang Suizhou's brief moment of shock and confusion, all he could see was a beast on its last legs; cornered, bleeding out, but still pressing itself low to the ground, ready to tear out his throat. It was intent on taking him down with it.

The smell of blood wafted through the air, mingling with the sweet fragrance emitted by the red candles, and beneath it, the faint scent of damp decay characteristic of a prison cell.

There was no need for him to ask any questions. He knew exactly who this man was.

It could be none other than the great "war god" of Liang who was brutally maimed by the last emperor of Southern Jing, and three years from now, he would chop off Jiang Suizhou's head as revenge, hanging it up to air-dry on the city walls.

Jiang Suizhou pressed his lips together. All of a sudden, he was struck with the strong urge to apologize to his student.

Let me go back. Please. I want to leave.

He was completely frozen. Meng Qianshan had no such issue and was starting to grow hysterical from panic.

What was His Highness doing? He'd finally lifted the veil, only to immediately toss it aside and stare coldly at the other person in complete silence.

Meng Qianshan glanced cautiously at Huo Wujiu.

He'd heard that the Marquis of Dingbei's only son was the type of heroic youth that was seldom seen in this world. Looking at him now, he could see that those rumors certainly had a foundation. After His Majesty captured Huo Wujiu, he had been thrown in the palace's underground prison. Historically, prisoners in that wretched place rarely survived for longer than three days before succumbing to torture.

However, this "Madam Huo" had remained there for over a month.

His lips were currently abnormally pale, and there were still purpling bruises at the corners of his mouth, as well as some traces of dried blood. Regardless, it had to be said—he truly was handsome. His features were well-defined, and he fit the archetypal image of a general strategizing in his tent, complemented by the fierce, intimidating energy emanating from him. Severely injured as he was, he didn't appear at all diminished. Rather, it added a touch of weary fragility to his appearance.

Under the bridal attire, his injuries were clearly visible. At his collar, a wound peeked out, but it was only the tip of the iceberg; dark red patches

bloomed somewhat inconspicuously against the similarly deep red of his robes.

Even though Meng Qianshan knew that his loyalties ultimately lay with his master, it was hard for him not to feel some pity for Madam Huo.

He decided to take a risk and play mediator. Meng Qianshan carefully approached, hunched forward in a bow, and brought Jiang Suizhou the linked cups of wine.

“Your Highness,” he said as he bowed a little deeper next to his master.

Jiang Suizhou cast him a sidelong glance. Shockingly, there were two golden cups brimming with wine sitting on the tray that Meng Qianshan was offering to him.

Well, that might be just the thing to help settle his nerves.

And so he picked up one cup and knocked it back in a single gulp.

Meng Qianshan gaped so hard that his eyeballs nearly fell out of their sockets.

Your Highness! Those are the nuptial cups! I wasn't just offering you a drink...

Meng Qianshan glanced anxiously between Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu.

One wore an expression that was as impassive as a statue, while the other was frosty and arrogant, just like the King of Hell. At the sight of the two of them, Meng Qianshan forcefully swallowed back down what he was about to say.

His master turned his head in his direction and placed the golden cup back on the tray.

“You’re dismissed,” he said.

“Er, Your Highness...” Meng Qianshan trailed off, startled.

His master flicked a cool look at him. The leaping candlelight highlighted the tiny mole at the outer corner of his eye.

“All here are dismissed.”

After downing the cup of wine, Jiang Suizhou finally managed to pull himself together.

Now he had no doubt that he had transmigrated into the version of history described in his student’s thesis, and he had become the doomed prince who had married Huo Wujiu.

With that confirmed, a sort of calmness settled over him.

In short, the person he had transmigrated into was going to die an early death no matter what, so being killed by Huo Wujiu was the better of his many bad options.

After all, an illness was uncontrollable, but the relationship between two people could be changed.

Huo Wujiu was generally viewed as a principled and honorable historical figure. Even though he was the conqueror, his uncle ultimately took power. He seemed to have no interest in political games. His uncle’s son had succeeded his uncle on the throne after his passing, whereas Huo

Wujiu would return to Yangguan with his soldiers and devote the rest of his life to protecting the pass.

Presumably, he was someone who valued integrity, which meant that as long as Jiang Suizhou showed him some respect instead of humiliating him, he most likely wouldn't kill him in three years' time.

That said...

He looked at Huo Wujiu.

Jing Suizhou's current identity was that of an imperial prince of Southern Jing, and he and his bride were supposed to be enemies. The man sitting in front of him was a member of the insurgent faction.

If Jiang Suizhou was deliberately friendly to him right off the bat, it would undoubtedly arouse suspicion, producing the opposite result.

In that case, he'd have to play the part at least a little.

Jiang Suizhou drew in a slow breath before he spoke in a deliberately cold voice.

"How disgusting." He sneered. "You reek of blood."

Never in his life had he spoken to someone in this manner. He'd grown up in an exceedingly strict and not particularly happy household. This had resulted in Jiang Suizhou being a very polite and well-behaved child who'd eventually become a very polite and well-behaved man.

As a result, the words inevitably came out of his mouth a little awkward and stiff, lacking in confidence.

Fortunately, his voice was rather monotone to begin with, and it carried an inherent note of haughty disdain, which just barely managed to

cover up the flaws in his delivery. It was good enough for the purpose of a bluff.

Huo Wujiu didn't respond to his gibe. Rather, he lowered his eyes to the red veil that had fallen to the floor.

He appeared extremely indifferent, with a touch of innate arrogance. Even now, fully at the mercy of his enemy, he was still imposing and unnerving. Jiang Suizhou didn't dare to step any closer to him.

Forcing himself to keep his cool, Jiang Suizhou continued speaking.

"Were you dragged to my residence immediately straight out of prison? How indiscriminate must my brother consider me to think that I could even stomach something like this?"

It took everything in his power to be harsh and unkind, but when the words left his mouth, the discomfort was so overwhelming that a slight shudder crawled down his back.

Huo Wujiu's gaze lifted and swept lightly over Jiang Suizhou.

The Prince of Jing stood there in the glow of the many red candles, shoulders thrown back, his eyes dark and flinty. Those vulpine eyes, upturned at the outer corners, glistened remarkably in the soft light, and the brilliant red of his robes made the little mole at the edge of his eye seem all the more bewitching in comparison.

His tone was quite ferocious but distinctly uneasy. There was even an apologetic and ashamed inflection underlying his words, as if he had never spoken cruelly to someone before.

Huo Wujiu had exchanged blows with Southern Jing many times. Naturally, he had heard of His Highness, the Prince of Jing, whose reputation had long preceded him.

Born sickly to a beautiful femme fatale of a concubine, he was crafty and cunning to the core; in no way was he a person of good character.

The rumors of his sinister nature began years prior, back when he was around twelve or thirteen and still considered a potential successor to the throne. Corpses were always seen towed out of his palace quarters, and not just any corpses but those of people who had died in ways that were particularly unsavory to view. After the Prince of Jing's eyes opened to a new world, he became a cut-sleeve, and the numerous male concubines in his harem became his new toys until they too were discarded. These days, there weren't many left alive.

However, that certainly didn't match up with what Huo Wujiu currently observed. Surely those rumors must have been an exaggeration.

Jiang Suizhou, so preoccupied with mulling over his diction, didn't notice Huo Wujiu's fleeting evaluation.

"I will have a physician come by and assess you tomorrow," Jiang Suizhou said after a brief pause. "Even should you die, you won't be doing it in my residence. From now on, just do as you're told and stay put. Don't cause trouble for me."

Once he finished saying that, Jiang Suizhou turned around and exhaled slightly in relief.

...That was aggressive enough, right?

Not only did he have to maintain the animosity that he was supposed to have when faced with an enemy, he also had to avoid actually harming him. Simultaneously, he had to find a good enough excuse to treat his wounds.

It was a difficult task.

Of course, he would rather Huo Wujiu receive medical attention tonight.

The man had just left the prison, after all, and the emperor certainly wouldn't have sent for a doctor. Although his injuries were all nonlethal flesh wounds, prompt treatment was always best. Moreover, as someone from the modern era, Jiang Suizhou had never witnessed much gore before, and he felt a little unsettled by the pungent scent of blood coming from Huo Wujiu's body.

Yet he knew that he couldn't call for a doctor right away.

As the only imperial prince in the court, he still wasn't sure what kind of people were employed in his residence. That was also why he had dismissed all of the servants earlier.

If he rushed to treat the enemy's injuries immediately, that naturally wouldn't make much sense. On the other hand, if they were to spend a night together, perhaps it would be more understandable for him to summon a physician on his behalf the next day.

Jiang Suizhou furtively surveyed the room.

The residence's ceremonial hall was designated for special events like wedding rituals. The single proper sleeping area was the red lacquer gold-rimmed canopy bed intended for the new couple. Apart from that, the only other furnishing spacious enough to lie down on was a small, narrow daybed which seemed more like decoration than functional furniture. It was sophisticated, with delicately carved corners, but only about two handspans wide at most. There were no other places to sleep.

Jiang Suizhou looked at the daybed with resignation in his eyes. He knew that he would have no choice but to sleep on it and make do for the

night.

Before he made his next move, he made sure to put in the effort to sell it properly. He shot Huo Wujiu a frosty look.

“Go lie down on the bed and keep your distance, so that foul stench lingering about you doesn’t reach me,” he said.

He was entirely unaware that, in combination with the way the candlelight danced across his delicate features, this condescending, holier-than-thou attitude was actually faintly seductive.

Jiang Suizhou whirled around again and walked straight to the daybed.

He lay down there, already mentally prepared to put up with it for the night.

Since he was facing the wall, he didn’t notice that Huo Wujiu’s gaze had landed on his back.

An icy scrutiny, as cold as a blade buried in the snow of Yangguan.

A moment later, Huo Wujiu looked away again, casting his eyes down as he slowly flipped over his left hand, which had been resting on his knee the entire time, and uncurled his fingers.

His palm was coated in fresh blood from the sliver of wood clenched there, sharp as a knife.

He had forcibly pried it off from the inner walls of the sedan chair on the way to the ceremonial hall.

Originally, he had intended to bury this wood fragment in the Prince of Jing’s throat at the first opportunity that he managed to seize.

He shot another unreadable glance at Jiang Suizhou’s back.

However, just as quickly as that opportunity came, it had slipped from his grasp. He'd been ready to kill the other man the moment he lifted the veil, but he'd hesitated when he'd been met with the sight of those eyes; bright and clear but also extremely flustered, seemingly frightened.

Huo Wujiu pressed his eyes shut.

It was only when he felt the wood fragment digging into his flesh from how tightly he was gripping it that he'd remembered himself. In that moment, he hadn't been able to strike.

He had never been fond of hurting the small and the weak.

He sat quietly for another second, then he unhurriedly opened his eyes. With only a bit of effort, he braced his hands on either side of the wheelchair and transferred himself to the bed.

The action instantly triggered shooting pain throughout his body, and his muscles trembled uncontrollably. As if this didn't bother him in the slightest, he nimbly hid the bloodstained sliver of wood beneath the bed with a shift of his hand, under the cover of the faint rustling noise that was generated when he moved himself to the bed.

He scanned Jiang Suizhou again. The other man appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable on the daybed; his back was rigid, but he seemed to be attempting to compel himself to fall asleep.

With a scoff, Huo Wujiu averted his gaze.

Chapter 4

JIANG SUIZHOU SQUEEZED his eyes shut, hoping that sleep would swiftly whisk him away so he could make it through this night. Maybe he would wake up back in his apartment tomorrow morning, jarred to consciousness by the sound of his alarm. At the very least, he could certainly use a good, peaceful night's rest.

However, Jiang Suizhou was unable to achieve even that.

The decoratively carved daybed was even more uncomfortable than it had initially appeared. The only somewhat sustainable sleeping position available was on his side, with the thin cloak pulled over him as a poor imitation of a blanket. The narrow daybed jabbed into his lower back, causing it to ache and throb. Despite being indoors in the springtime, he was still so cold that his hands and feet were freezing.

This weak body of his was even more fragile than he had expected.

He tossed and turned the entire night as he struggled, unable to fall asleep. Since he was not granted that mercy, he could only helplessly endure until the red candles in the room finished burning, and the sky gradually brightened outside.

When he finally sat up at daybreak, he was in so much pain that he felt as though his body was about to crumble to dust. There was a tickle in his throat, and he wanted nothing more than to cough.

Muffling himself as best he could, he coughed a few times and kneaded his temples to ease his dizziness.

From the window, Jiang Suizhou could see that quite a few maidservants were already waiting below the veranda. Meng Qianshan stood outside the door with his hands cupped together inside his sleeves, presumably waiting for Jiang Suizhou to awaken, so he could come in and attend to him.

He absolutely could not allow the eunuch to enter. As soon as he came in, it would be obvious that Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu hadn't shared a bed.

That was when he realized: He had to get out of here *fast*.

He shot a glance at Huo Wujiu.

He was lying on his side, facing Jiang Suizhou, his eyes closed and body motionless. His unoccupied wheelchair sat next to the bed.

Sunlight trickled in through the window and landed softly on his face, casting a shadow underneath his eyelashes, which were dark as crow feathers.

The lines of his face were sharp, clearly defining his features, and the bridge of his nose was tall and straight. Those fierce, fearsome black eyes were currently closed, concealed by his long eyelashes. Overall, his appearance was almost exaggeratedly heroic.

In the light, the only imperfection Jiang Suizhou could spot was an old, tiny scar which cut through the tail of his angular left eyebrow, cleanly severing it in two. It was akin to a scratch marring a celestial soldier, thus bringing them down into the mortal realm and rendering them a little more human.

He was indeed remarkably good-looking. More importantly, though, he was sound asleep.

Exhaling in relief, Jiang Suizhou cautiously got up from the daybed.

It would be best if Huo Wujiu didn't awaken yet.

After all, Jiang Suizhou had put on such a tough act the day before, only to huddle up on the daybed for the night and slink away as soon as the sun rose the next morning. There wasn't really any way to make that seem casual.

Something embarrassing like this was best done as discreetly as possible.

With that belief in mind, Jiang Suizhou tidied his robes and straightened his posture before he strode out of the room. He did his best to appear bold and unabashed, when in reality, he was treading as lightly as possible.

He opened the door, quickly slipped out, and closed it behind him again. The ever so slight noises in the room vanished with him, his footsteps fading into the distance. It left behind nothing but an empty quiet.

Huo Wujiu opened his eyes.

Those dark, dour eyes were sharp and quite unlike the eyes of someone just roused.

His indifferent gaze fell upon the daybed placed below the wide-open window. It was bathed in sunlight, and specks of dust whirled through the air.

The daybed was already vacant.

It had even been meticulously tidied up, the wrinkles clumsily flattened out. He could almost visualize the scene of that person doing his best to cover up any sign that he had slept there.

Huo Wujiu stared for another second.

He had always been extremely vigilant, aided by his sharp ears and keen eyes. None of the Prince of Jing's movements last night had escaped his notice.

He had watched as the other man squeezed onto the minuscule daybed, and he had listened to him toss and turn the entire night, flipping back and forth in a way that the prince likely thought was very quiet and subtle.

Then, just now, he had heard him tiptoe out of the room like a common thief.

Unbelievable.

Prior to coming here, Huo Wujiu had imagined what might happen when he met the Prince of Jing in his residence. The prince was malicious, devious, and grudge-bearing, and he had never gotten along with the Jing emperor. Huo Wujiu knew that he was not a reward for the Prince of Jing, as the emperor might claim, but a humiliating punishment. It would be impossible for the prince not to hate him.

Huo Wujiu had been sure that he would face far worse in this room than he had in the imperial prison.

However, the Prince of Jing did absolutely nothing to him last night. Not only that, he'd actively tried to avoid him, as if he found Huo Wujiu to be utterly terrifying.

Huo Wujiu looked down at his legs.

It was true that the people of Southern Jing feared him, and it was precisely because of that fear that they had severed his tendons and maimed his legs. But even now, incapacitated as he was, they were still afraid. He

could no longer even stand up, and yet, yesterday a swarm of palace guards had been dispatched to escort him and seal off the streets. Not to mention, the sedan chair had been reinforced to be even more secure than a prisoner wagon, as though he were capable of growing wings and flying away.

Huo Wujiu realized early on that the intensity and escalation of their abuse toward him was directly in proportion to the amount of terror that his name once struck into their hearts. As long as he was held captive at the hands of the enemy, their fear would manifest as the knives that were stabbed into his body. They would only feel at ease once he was on his very last breath.

It wasn't wrong for them to behave in such a way. After all, it wasn't as if he planned to sit around and wait to die. Not as long as he had even a sliver of space to move.

But he had never seen someone act like the Prince of Jing before. Despite being so clearly afraid of him, as well as equipped with ample ways to deal with him, he hadn't done anything at all.

Huo Wujiu didn't believe for a single second that the Prince of Jing was pure and kindhearted. At the same time, there didn't seem to be a reason for the Prince of Jing to put on an act in front of him.

He shut his eyes again.

Back in the prison, he often had to make guesses regarding the measures that others might take, all in the interest of preparing as many backup plans as possible. One needed to be ready for anything in an environment like that. He'd expected that his situation would inevitably change in unpredictable ways. However, he had not foreseen the most significant change being the Prince of Jing himself.

The door swung open, startling Meng Qianshan who had been waiting attentively next to the entrance. Jiang Suizhou suddenly emerged from the room on his own, prompting the eunuch to check the sky to gauge the time before hurrying to greet him.

“Your Highness, there are still a few hours left until the Grand Assembly. Why not rest a while longer?”

Jiang Suizhou closed the door gently behind him.

The Grand Assembly? Now that was something he could understand. The Jing dynasty didn’t follow the custom of having a daily early-morning audience with the emperor. Instead, a meeting was held every five days that was known as the Grand Assembly. Though he was aware of this, he hadn’t thought that he would encounter it the very next day after his transmigration.

“I happened to wake up early,” he said mildly, his voice a little bit hoarse. “I’m all right.”

Meng Qianshan hastily responded affirmatively before he turned and commanded the nearby servants to have breakfast readied in His Highness’s quarters. Then he lent his arm to Jiang Suizhou and led him out of the courtyard.

After getting little to no sleep the previous night, Jiang Suizhou’s dizziness and grogginess prompted him to allow Meng Qianshan’s support without protest.

The eunuch glanced curiously at him as they walked.

Jiang Suizhou looked completely worn out. Dark circles lined his exhausted eyes, starkly contrasting with his ashen complexion. Even his gait was unsteady.

Good heavens, thought Meng Qianshan. It seems like last night was quite intense for His Highness.

After one glimpse, Meng Qianshan furtively looked away again. But he couldn't resist a double take, and then a third.

His peeping was so frequent and brazen that Jiang Suizhou noticed, even in his muddled mental state.

As Jiang Suizhou sat down in the palanquin waiting at the gate of the courtyard, he caught Meng Qianshan shooting yet another shifty-eyed look at him.

"What is it?" he finally asked, brow furrowed.

Meng Qianshan quickly broke eye contact.

"Nothing at all," Meng Qianshan said, beaming. "Your servant merely wanted to ask if Your Highness would like to eat anything in particular this morning."

"Anything is fine," he replied with a shake of his head.

Meng Qianshan made a noise of acknowledgment and directed the porters to lift the litter, after which they set off in the direction of Anyin Hall. Jiang Suizhou and Meng Qianshan were quiet for a while, then after a moment of hesitation, Jiang Suizhou voiced a question he'd been mulling over.

“Meng Qianshan, have the proper arrangements been made for Huo Wu—ah, Madam Huo’s living quarters?”

Yesterday, they had spent the night in the residence’s ceremonial hall, which was used for wedding festivities. Today, Huo Wujiu would have to move to his new living quarters. Jiang Suizhou’s lack of sleep had him feeling quite woozy, but he still remembered the plotting he’d done the night before.

He had made up his mind to do everything in his power to avoid courting trouble with Huo Wujiu. Therefore, it was his responsibility to ensure that Huo Wujiu wasn’t treated unfairly when it came to basic necessities, such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation.

Meng Qianshan was dumbfounded. His Highness did not normally deign it worth his interest to care about such trifling domestic matters.

When no answer seemed forthcoming from Meng Qianshan, Jiang Suizhou turned his head and saw the man’s baffled, vacant expression.

“Meng Qianshan,” he prompted.

“No need to worry, Your Highness!” Meng Qianshan instantly replied. “Arrangements were made a long time ago!”

Jiang Suizhou paused before continuing, “His injuries seem severe. Why don’t you call someone over to take a look at some point?”

Goodness, he even wants to summon a physician for him, thought Meng Qianshan.

“Your servant will find a physician shortly to examine Madam Huo,” he replied with several dutiful nods.

“Do take it seriously,” Jiang Suizhou warned.

Having said what he needed, he withdrew his gaze. Closing his eyes, he propped a hand against his temple and took advantage of this brief opportunity to rest.

He didn't notice that Meng Qianshan, who was walking beside the palanquin, was silently shrieking within his mind at this utterly stupefying series of orders.

Meng Qianshan had been sent to serve His Highness when he was a little older than ten, after he had purified his body. All things considered, he had accompanied him for many years, but he had never seen His Highness give such attention to any particular concubine. There were others, of course, and His Highness did favor some in particular, but he did not dote on them in this manner.

It was particularly strange considering the frosty anger that had radiated from His Highness when he arrived at the ceremonial hall last night. Not only had he tossed aside the veil, he'd even drunk the nuptial wine alone. Just waiting for a look from His Highness was enough to send cold sweat running down Meng Qianshan's back.

And now, after a single night, His Highness had begun to show this much concern for the madam! What could cause someone's attitude to change so quickly?

What, indeed?

Meng Qianshan was a eunuch, not a fool. He was not so naive as to be left wondering. He could only think of one possibility that made any sense.

His Highness's bedraggled appearance this morning was clearly that of someone who had overindulged in his carnal desires. It was quite a vivid

glimpse into the madam's skills.

At that thought, Meng Qianshan couldn't stop himself from heaving a silent sigh.

How unexpected! Who would've thought that a man so severely incapacitated could still perform at such a level?

Chapter 5

ONCE JIANG SUIZHOU and the others departed, the courtyard and hall fell completely silent.

Huo Wujiu sat up and braced himself against the side of the bed. Pulling the wheelchair a little closer, he pushed himself onto it with a bit of force.

He gathered back his hair and deftly tied it up. Then he lifted his head and gazed out the window.

It was getting bright outside.

He had always been quick to adapt. Back in Yangguan, he learned to tolerate the sandstorms of the northern lands exceptionally well, to the point where he could even ride a horse at full gallop in the Gobi Desert. When his father dispatched the troops, he swiftly acclimated to the brutal realities of war. The conflict dragged on for years, and each battle delivered a hard-earned lesson. He learned how to crawl out from mountains of corpses and seas of blood to lead his subordinates properly.

This was why, in such a brief span of time, he'd come to terms with the fact that his legs were now completely immobile. He'd had to accept this in order to learn how to navigate his new daily life as a disabled prisoner isolated in the enemy stronghold.

The sun continued to gradually rise through the sky. Its light streamed in through the window, where Huo Wujiu sat lost in thought, and pooled on the floor. As the sun climbed higher and higher, the light advanced bit by bit toward Huo Wujiu.

When the light was about to engulf the edge of the wheelchair, he heard a knock on the door.

Huo Wujiu looked toward the sound. Almost imperceptibly, his eyes darkened.

He knew that if he wished to obtain some answers, now would be an excellent opportunity to do so.

Naturally, Jiang Suizhou was oblivious to the impure thoughts that Meng Qianshan entertained behind his back. At the moment, his own thoughts revolved entirely around the upcoming Grand Assembly. He closed his eyes, but he wasn't particularly sleepy and thus spent the time pondering what was to come.

Every court official would be present at the Grand Assembly to pay respects to the emperor as well as discuss official business. However, considering the future records of the last emperor of Southern Jing's accomplishments, Jiang Suizhou expected that these court assemblies most likely weren't that productive.

What concerned him most was his own role in all of this. After all, there was pitifully little written down regarding the Prince of Jing, whom he had become. In total, there were only a few lines—perhaps two or three at most.

He was the last emperor's sole surviving younger brother. He had some sort of congenital illness. He'd met an untimely end.

That was about it as far as facts on the Prince of Jing. Well, Jiang Suizhou could now add one more tidbit: He was a cut-sleeve.

Other than that, the Prince of Jing was a blank slate, and Jiang Suizhou struggled to gauge how to play the part. He didn't even know what his official rank was, much less what people the original prince knew, what kinds of relationships or alliances he had with them, or how to communicate with them.

The most urgent issue on the table right now, though, had to be his marriage to Huo Wujiu. Everyone knew that he had wed *the* General Huo yesterday, and in all likelihood, he was going to become the target of public ridicule today.

Reality proved that his worries were remarkably accurate.

At least he would soon resolve the question of his official rank. As soon as he donned his court official robes, Jiang Suizhou would know what his rank was, and when Meng Qianshan brought him the ivory hu,⁵ he would know where he was supposed to stand during the assembly.

His field of study suited his current predicament extraordinarily well, which gave him a bit of an advantage. Unfortunately, none of that told him how to face the strange looks and judgmental stares of his fellow civil and military officials.

Starting from the moment he disembarked from the palanquin and passed through Kaiyang Gate, they surrounded him, and the assessing looks never ceased. He could've let it go if it had been merely one or two people, but almost everyone seemed to be casting him repeated furtive glances. Jiang Suizhou felt rather uneasy, as though there were a spotlight above him.

There were just so many eyes—some taking delight in his misfortune, some filled with loathing and disdain, some devastated and enraged. Although a number of people seemed to want to say something to him, few actually did so.

One of the bolder officials walked up to Jiang Suizhou and nudged him with his shoulder.

“Your Highness must be exhausted after last night, hm? You’re certainly lucky in love,” he said with a knowing smile. “Quite lucky, indeed!”

Based on the official’s attire, he was of lower third rank; which is to say, not a particularly important man. Jiang Suizhou’s own official position in the court wasn’t high either—he had a rather idle job in the Ministry of Rites—but he was still an imperial prince. This official must have been backed by someone powerful for him to mock Jiang Suizhou so brazenly.

On that note, wasn’t there a particularly treacherous high-ranking court official around this time in the Jing dynasty? Pang Shao, that all-powerful official favored by the emperor, who controlled just about everything but the weather and made numerous appearances in the historical records.

Jiang Suizhou glanced impassively at the rude official and didn’t respond.

His icy, disdainful gaze had always been exceptionally intimidating. Now, as the prince, it contained a certain degree of warning as well. The inappropriately familiar, perverse smile melted right off the official’s face, and his gleeful expression became awkward, tinged with the hint of fear.

Jiang Suizhou didn't bother glancing at him again. He pulled away and continued with the others.

The latter part of his walk to the court hall proceeded much more smoothly, thanks to that intimidating incident and his resulting off-putting demeanor. With that stress off his back, he was free to take in other details.

Up until three years ago, the Jing dynasty was based in Yecheng. Then the Liang army breached the capital under the command of Huo Wujiu, forcing the previous ruler, Emperor Ling of Jing, to flee south with his family and court officials. On the way there, he fell ill and passed away. The last emperor of the Jing dynasty, Jiang Shunheng, then swiftly traveled to Yuhang, which he renamed Lin'an and declared the new capital.

Even though Lin'an had been the capital for less than three years, it already had an imperial palace.

Constructed rather hastily and crudely, it sported a disjointed and chaotic layout. According to the historical records, after the emperor fled to Lin'an, he'd insisted that he wouldn't be a true emperor without an imperial palace. Thus, he compelled Southern Jing to produce a new imperial palace for him within half a year.

Despite the slapdash nature of its construction, it was still quite costly. Even from just his short walk, Jiang Suizhou could tell that the entire imperial palace complex was glittering with jade and gold, as opulent and lavish as it could possibly be. It seemed that the records regarding the emperor's absurd conduct were not biased in the slightest.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but marvel a little.

By the time he made it up the long stretch of white marble steps leading to Guangyuan Hall, there were already numerous court officials

standing inside. Thankfully, he'd paid very good attention to every detail when conducting his historical research at the university, which meant that he was able to locate his spot in the hall without too much trouble.

He took his place. Diagonally in front of him stood an older official, who appeared to be about fifty or sixty years old. His court robes indicated that he was of the upper-second rank, an entire rank higher than Jiang Suizhou.

At Jiang Suizhou's arrival, the older official turned his head and nodded at him in greeting.

"Your Highness is here early today," he said with a polite smile.

As he turned around, Jiang Suizhou glanced at the writing on his ivory hu to deduce his identity. This was the minister of the Ministry of Rites, Ji You. In other words, Jiang Suizhou's direct superior.

Ji You's expression was distant but amicable, indicating to Jiang Suizhou that he likely wasn't particularly close to the Prince of Jing. With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou returned the nod and politely bade him good morning in response.

The older man quickly scanned their surroundings, confirming the relative privacy of their conversation. It was quiet in their immediate vicinity, and few other people were present.

"Your Highness may feel a little wronged," he said in a low voice, "but endure it, and it will pass in time."

He kindly nodded again at Jiang Suizhou, then turned to face forward.

Jiang Suizhou wasn't entirely sure what to make of that, so he merely hummed a noncommittal noise of agreement and ended the conversation

there.

However, he came to understand what Ji You meant soon enough.

At the hour of the assembly, the rising sun leaped high above the brilliantly gold glazed tiles of the roof, and drums thundered outside the nearby Zhengyang Hall, followed closely by the sound of a eunuch's chanting.

The notoriously foolish and feckless final ruler of Southern Jing had arrived: Emperor You of Jing, Jiang Shunheng.

Throughout several thousand years of history, only a handful of emperors were given the posthumous title of "You."⁶ After all, every sovereign had points of merit and failure, but few were so heinous that the later generations would use their posthumous title as a way to disparage them.

But Jiang Shunheng and his father, posthumously given the name "Ling," were two of the rulers on that short list.

Jiang Suizhou cupped his hands and bowed along with the rest of the civil and military officials. Then he raised his head and looked toward the throne.

Atop it lounged a corpulent man in his thirties, wrapped in a black dragon robe embroidered with the twelve imperial symbols. The beaded tassels dangling from his crown clinked together as they swayed back and forth.

Unfortunately, that was the moment when Jiang Suizhou made eye contact with the emperor.

The overweight man's beady eyes picked through the crowd of court officials before honing in on him. Immediately, they gleamed with malicious intent and unrestrained joy.

Jiang Suizhou's heart skipped a beat.

As expected, the final emperor of Jing spoke to him only a moment later.

"Wudi,⁷ I trust that you enjoyed the beautiful concubine I bestowed upon you last night?" His voice rose and fell as he paused intermittently for dramatic effect, mockery underlying every word.

Roughly half of the officials in the hall started snickering, and the court, which originally had a stately and solemn atmosphere, instantly became a bit of a farce.

Jiang Suizhou gritted his teeth.

Seriously? This court only convenes once every five days, and instead of discussing official matters, you're turning it into a complete circus? No wonder the historical books roast you for being an incompetent ruler! No wonder your Jing dynasty was conquered!

However, the emperor's snide comment did at least allow Jiang Suizhou to pick up on some other observations.

The last ruler of Jing was ill-intentioned, and going by the reactions to his jab, the opinion of the court seemed divided. The officials either jeered in support of the emperor or simply stood there in awkward silence. It was clear that the original prince must not have been well-liked here. The emperor's decision to gift him an injured prisoner of war as a concubine was a highly efficient method of humiliating both Jiang Suizhou and Hu Wujiu at once.

In that case, he couldn't display any sort of cheerful or humorous attitude. He was expected to react with barely concealed shame and anger.

With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou twisted his mouth into a small grimace and clenched his jaw, as though he didn't wish to bring up the events from the prior night.

“As your younger brother, I humbly extend my gratitude for Huangxiong's⁸ generous reward.”

The emperor guffawed.

“Of course! My pleasure! You know, I heard that you didn't leave his room once the entire night,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou was speechless. Evidently, this foolish ruler planned to keep pushing.

Furthermore, he'd just brazenly revealed that there were indeed spies planted in his residence, as Jiang Suizhou suspected. The emperor made no attempt to hide that fact from him.

His honesty was not likely due to any sense of honor, but because he was truly just that stupid, Jiang Suizhou concluded. As he silently criticized the emperor, he deliberately shifted his expression to suggest he felt disgrace and embarrassment.

“And after getting up bright and early, you called for a physician? Oh, Wudi, you must take care of your health. How could you possibly withstand such...rigorous activity, considering the frail constitution you were born with?”

The emperor's delight only grew as he saw the look on Jiang Suizhou's face.

“Uncle, did you see?” the emperor crowed, turning to one of the officials up at the front. “My wudi’s complexion is so ghastly, I can see his dark circles from here! He must have been quite busy last night, ha ha!”

Jiang Suizhou inferred from that form of address that the high-ranking official he had spoken to could only be Pang Shao.

Pang Shao was Empress Dowager Pang’s elder brother, and he served as Grand Chancellor. According to the historical records, he’d behaved himself during the previous emperor’s reign. But after pushing Jiang Shunheng onto the throne, he dropped the facade entirely. He threw himself into amassing power and money, and he always indulged and flattered Jiang Shunheng—obviously endearing him to the young emperor.

Because of that, Jiang Shunheng, the last emperor of Jing, was exceedingly fond of his uncle.

Following the emperor’s barb, a low chuckle came from the front row of the court officials, but there was no additional commentary. Pang Shao obviously had no intention of keeping him in check or admonishing him.

Jiang Suizhou even detected a trace of genuine amusement in Pang Shao’s laughter.

He was slowly starting to see the bigger picture. As it turned out, not only was he married to the final boss destined to kill him sooner or later, his position in court was also extremely precarious.

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t even begin to describe how morose he was feeling inside.

He stood there, unenthusiastically listening to the emperor’s unrestrained ridicule and snide remarks, responding from time to time. The emperor grew more and more exhilarated as he went on; it was evident that

he had racked his pathetically small brain to come up with this ingenious marriage, all in anticipation of this day.

Eventually, Jiang Suizhou couldn't be bothered to retort, and he let the other man put on his own one-sided show.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one who was tiring of this nonsense—someone in the front row cleared their throat slightly, as if to urge the emperor to move things along.

The emperor's gaze snapped to the offending court official. He paused briefly, then understanding quickly dawned on his face. He laughed loudly before turning back to Jiang Suizhou.

“Wudi, this idea came to me yesterday,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou lifted his head to see the emperor staring at him with a poisonous smile on his face.

“The father of Madam Huo was Great Jing's Marquis of Dingbei back in the day, wasn't he? How funny, after all these twists and turns, we've become a single family once more. You could even say that our Great Jing is Madam Huo's true homeland.”

The emperor narrowed his eyes, and his smirk grew more dangerous.

“In that case, we mustn't disregard the custom of a bride returning home on the third day after the wedding. Allow me to take the lead in planning all this for you,” he continued. “In three days' time, bring Madam Huo to the palace as a homecoming of sorts. What say you?”

Chapter 6

A HOMECOMING?

Huo Wujiu brought down the current emperor's entire nation, and in return the emperor killed his father. Considering the current state of things, how could he still say that this was Huo Wujiu's true homeland?

Despite the emperor's claim, the tone of his voice blatantly indicated that he merely wanted an excuse to bring Huo Wujiu back for another round of humiliation and derision.

Thanks to the millennium of history separating them, Jiang Suizhou more or less had a basic understanding of this foolish sovereign: He was as simpleminded as they came. It was unlikely that this devious pretense of helping Huo Wujiu "return to his ancestral home" was something that he thought up on his own.

He recalled the look that the emperor exchanged with Pang Shao earlier.

More likely than not, Pang Shao and the emperor were colluding with each other. The emperor wanted to vent his anger on Huo Wujiu, and Pang Shao wanted to please him. As a result, Pang Shao devised this plan for him.

The two of them were on the same page, both pleased with the way things were going. Their respective wishes were being fulfilled, and Jiang Suizhou would be the one to suffer for it in the end.

And to Huo Wujiu, it didn't really matter which one of them was actually doing the dishonoring. In Huo Wujiu's eyes, Jiang Suizhou was no

different than the emperor or Pang Shao or the rest of the court. He was but a rotten apple in the basket, like the rest. The emperor's cruelty might as well be Jiang Suizhou's cruelty, and it would become another strike against him.

This petty tyranny might make the emperor feel better, but it would plant the seed for a grudge that would take Jiang Suizhou down as well. Perhaps Jiang Shunheng didn't care for his own life, and that was all well and good—he was free to do whatever he wished—but Jiang Suizhou would not allow his head to be used as a gambling chip in foolish political games.

Jiang Suizhou gritted his teeth.

He had to refuse on behalf of Huo Wujiu. Moreover, he had to provide a rational reason for his rejection. He paused, allowing a hint of revulsion and embarrassment to creep into the expression on his delicate face.

“Huangxiong, that's not necessary, is it?” he replied, lowering his gaze to conceal any emotion his eyes might betray beneath fine, long eyelashes. “A disabled man would hardly be presentable in such an esteemed setting. Why incur Huangxiong's disgust for no good reason?”

His appearance was the picture of humble refusal, but he spoke very slowly and allowed the unmasked loathing to drip from each and every word. Although he dressed his words up prettily, as if he were only thinking of the emperor, everyone in the hall saw through the flattering pretense. It was obvious that Jiang Suizhou considered the emperor's request to be disgraceful.

No matter what, he was still an imperial prince. The idea of paying a postwedding visit to the palace with a prisoner of war was absurd. It was almost comical, really, and beyond shameful.

When the emperor heard that, he grew even more enthused. Gleeful expressions appeared on quite a few of the court officials' faces as they rejoiced in Jiang Suizhou's misfortune.

"What's this? You aren't willing to show him off?" He pouted mockingly. "Oh, Wudi, your wedding was only last night. How have you already become so heartless?"

Jiang Suizhou felt repulsed by his belittling tone. However, he had no option but to continue the act.

He fell silent for a moment, intending to seem immensely ashamed that he had been intimate with Huo Wujiu.

"This is different, Huangxiong," he finally muttered.

The emperor roared with laughter, which echoed and spread through much of the hall.

Pang Shao coughed lightly. After he attracted the emperor's attention, Pang Shao blinked at him in a deliberate manner. The emperor understood at once.

Before the assembly, his uncle had instructed him to follow a few guidelines here. Although the suggestion regarding Huo Wujiu could serve as a fun way to vigorously humiliate Jiang Suizhou some more, it was only worth mentioning briefly. More importantly, he should use this as a bargaining chip to obtain something valuable from Jiang Suizhou in return.

The emperor wasn't particularly interested in anything that Jiang Suizhou might have, but he would happily take the excuse to snatch

something away from him and deny him it.

His interests had never changed, not since they were children and he had to watch as his father doted lovingly on sickly little Jiang Suizhou to the point of ignoring Jiang Shunheng, the legitimate imperial prince. Even though he was no longer that pitiful boy, even though he was already the emperor, and Jiang Suizhou was nothing but an embarrassment...

The emperor cleared his throat and adjusted his legs into a more comfortable position. In doing so, he stamped his foot on the throne's cushion.

"So be it then. If you insist on keeping your lover hidden away in splendor, Wudi, I won't force you," he said with a smile, drawing out his words. "However, if you're going to hide your little beauty from me, then it's only fair that you give something in return, don't you think?"

Jiang Suizhou's brows furrowed ever so slightly.

So, he had guessed correctly. Pang Shao was the one behind the emperor's underhanded trick. Seeing that he had successfully amused the emperor, he wasn't about to walk away empty-handed. If it didn't occur to the emperor that Pang Shao was owed some remuneration, then of course Pang Shao was going to take it himself.

But what was it that he wanted? As far as Jiang Suizhou was aware, he was nothing more than a pampered prince with a cushy, unimportant job and few real responsibilities. What did he have that was worth them conspiring against him for?

"I'm listening, Huangxiong," he said cautiously, testing the waters.

The emperor cleared his throat again. "Well, you know the ancestral temple that is to be built in the palace? The one that the Ministry of Rites is

supervising? I've been thinking that perhaps the Ministry of Works should be involved instead."

Jiang Suizhou's eyebrow arched.

"It just so happens that Consort Luan has been imploring me to allow her father to share some of your burden," the emperor continued. "Wudi, I simply cannot break a beauty's heart. It's just too cruel. Wouldn't you agree?"

So that was what it was; just good old-fashioned greed.

Under the reign of Emperor You, the corruption in the court of Southern Jing reached soaring new heights, exacerbated by the power that Pang Shao wielded. In ancient times, when officials wanted to embezzle, they usually tampered with large-scale construction projects. They tended to be relatively easy targets, and projects that were directly related to the imperial palace could generate quite a hefty profit.

That was precisely why Pang Shao had allowed the emperor to make such a fuss about building a new imperial palace. Pang Shao permitted the emperor to proceed with construction because he planned to divert the flow of money from the national treasury to Pang Shao's own pockets.

The construction mustn't have been finished at this point in history; hence, Pang Shao was hungrily eyeing this well-paid commission. But how had such an apparent gold mine ended up in Jiang Suizhou's hands?

Jiang Suizhou remained silent for a while, surreptitiously glancing around the hall. Some people appeared calm and unperturbed as they watched the show; others wore unreadable expressions and didn't speak. A handful of officials actually looked somewhat nervous, and their eyes kept drifting in his direction.

Opinion was clearly divided, and it seemed as though there were secretly two factions lurking underneath the hidden turbulence of the court.

A suspicion suddenly emerged in Jiang Suizhou's mind, filling him with a terrible foreboding.

From his observations, he apparently had a bit of influence concealed within the court himself. His allies had done everything possible to ensure that this commission would make it into his hands.

Pang Shao had likely manipulated the emperor into making such a request in order to compete against Jiang Suizhou and jostle for power. If that was the case, the situation was much more complicated than he had thought. Any concession he made now would negatively impact more than just his own interests.

However, he was essentially walking blindfolded at the moment. He was completely in the dark regarding the affairs of the imperial court; he didn't even know who was working for him. Even if he fought to claim this commission, there was a high probability that some sort of incident would occur nonetheless.

The bottom line was that he only had two options—neither was very good, but he was going to have to choose one regardless. He must either relinquish this boon that the Prince of Jing had secured with much difficulty, offending all of his allies, or he had to bring Huo Wujiu to the palace for a round of humiliation, offending Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou sighed.

He felt as if he were being cooked on an open flame. In the end, he decided it was more important to him that his head stay firmly attached to his neck and not strung up on the wall.

“Wudi, why aren’t you saying anything?” the emperor pressed, slouching on the throne. “It’s only fair you choose one or the other, isn’t it? So, what will it be—a good lover or a good commission?”

Jiang Suizhou looked up. This time, the disgust and anger on his face was completely genuine.

“I couldn’t agree more, Huangxiong. Indeed, I shouldn’t overstep my bounds,” he said steadily.

Obviously quite pleased with himself, the emperor widened his small, cruel smile.

The sun had risen high in the sky, and the shadows of the trees swayed outside the window. Sunlight filtered through the tender green shoots dotting the tree branches to radiantly illuminate the room, fanning splotches of light across the dark, glassy floor tiles.

Tiny dust motes swirled quietly through the sunbeams, giving the ethereal rays of light an almost physical quality, like fine muslin cloth.

Everything was tranquil and bright.

Physician Zhou knelt on the floor, frozen. A fine layer of cold sweat soaked his forehead. His eyes were very wide, his spine and neck stiff.

A keen-edged, bloodstained sliver of wood was pressed against the pulsing jugular vein in his neck.

Even though the blood wasn’t his, he could sense just how sharp that piece of wood was—it could instantly slice through his throat and take his

life. He didn't dare move a single muscle.

"Madam... G-General! Whatever you wish to know, all you have to do is ask!" he cried out, a tremble in his voice as well as his body.

Huo Wujiu sat above him, leaning forward slightly in his wheelchair. One arm rested languidly on his knee, while the other braced the bloody wooden shard firmly against Physician Zhou's throat.

"What did he send you here to do?" he asked, his voice deep and low. He tilted his head to gaze loftily down at the person kneeling in front of him.

"With all due respect, I was merely following Qianshan-gonggong's orders to come and treat your wounds!"

Huo Wujiu was unsympathetic and disbelieving.

"Tell me the truth," he said flatly.

"That was the truth!" yelped Physician Zhou, close to tears.

Huo Wujiu sized him up, a cool look in his eyes.

The man didn't seem to be putting on an act, but that didn't eliminate the possibility that he was.

Earlier, when the man had first arrived and introduced himself as the household physician, a suspicion took root in Huo Wujiu's mind.

The Emperor of Jing was a fool, but the Prince of Jing was not. The emperor may have captured Huo Wujiu with the sole intent of torturing and toying with him, but there was no way that was the prince's main objective. Although the Prince of Jing had behaved differently yesterday than the rumors had suggested, there was always a kernel of truth in such hearsay. Huo Wujiu was not about to let his guard down now.

If he took no action, the Prince of Jing would assume that he was biding his time for some trick he had up his sleeve. In that case, the prince would most likely want either to obtain intelligence about the Liang army from him or to use him to oppose the Jing emperor.

And what would be an effective way for the Prince of Jing to strengthen his control over his newly disabled concubine? Well, it would be quite easy to drug him under the pretense of treating his injuries.

Huo Wujiu stared at the physician, who was shaking like a leaf. His gaze was inscrutable, and he appeared to be unmoved.

“Then open your mouth,” he commanded.

The court physician complied, still quivering. Shortly thereafter, a medicinal pill abruptly landed on his tongue. Before he could react, Huo Wujiu gripped his chin tightly and jerked his head up.

The pill slid down his throat.

Physician Zhou’s eyes widened even more as intense, searing pain immediately swept through him, rising from his stomach.

The general leisurely drew back the sliver of wood, then braced his hand against his knee and pushed himself upright again. He was divinely handsome, his eyes calm and placid like an unfathomably deep pool of water. There was something about him akin to the deity Wuchang, ready to seize one’s soul for the underworld.

He leaned back in the wheelchair.

The air of confidence through which he held himself practically transformed the incredibly simple and crudely crafted wooden chair beneath him into a tiger pelt in the royal tent of a military encampment.

“This pill is capable of liquefying your organs within a quarter of an hour. I suggest you speak while I still have the antidote with me.”

Physician Zhou wept in anguish at this.

“I am truly not deceiving you, General!” cried the physician. “I really did receive orders to come examine your wounds!”

He shivered because of both the fear and the burning in his abdomen. He scrambled for the medicine chest that had been cast aside, flipped it open with shaking hands, and showed it to Huo Wujiu.

“These are all used for treating injuries. If you do not believe me, pick any one of your choosing, and I will use it on myself to prove it to you!”

As he spoke, he frantically poured out the contents of the chest and started opening every container for Huo Wujiu to examine.

Huo Wujiu gazed at him quietly. He finally believed the physician’s words.

So, he really had been sent here to treat his wounds?

For some inexplicable reason, the way that Jiang Suizhou had looked last night, under the glow of the red candles, resurfaced in his mind. He looked like a rabbit whose ears were flattened against its head, frightened of a predator, yet still trying in vain to appear more vicious than it really was.

Well, it certainly made sense when he looked at it that way. The prince most likely didn’t have the guts to drug him.

Huo Wujiu stared calmly at the physician for a few seconds longer. Then he drew a small bottle out of his robes and tossed a dark brown pill onto the floor.

“One pill is effective for three months. Don’t breathe a word of what happened today to anyone else. Three months from now, come find me for another pill,” Huo Wujiu said.

Physician Zhou hastily snatched up the pill and stuffed it into his mouth.

“Since you’re here to treat my wounds, you’re free to stand and examine them.”

Huo Wujiu’s tone was neutral as he glanced down at the medicine bottle in his hand.

Altogether, he only had two types of pills on his person. When he was first imprisoned, the soldier who escorted him in was a former subordinate of his father’s old friend, Lou Yue. Consequently, he had “overlooked” a few items while he was searching through Huo Wujiu’s personal belongings. Just a few small items that he could use to stay alive.

One bottle of medicine was meant to revitalize and boost one’s energy and blood flow. It was exceptionally useful during long marches through the snow.

The other could swiftly staunch the flow of blood from a serious injury, but it would cause severe, agonizing abdominal pain upon ingestion. After approximately eight minutes, the pain would subside.

The physician clambered to his feet and wiped away his tears, staggering around in a bit of a daze.

Huo Wujiu silently tucked the pills back into his robes.

Chapter 7

BEFORE HE BORE WITNESS to Huo Wujiu's injuries, Physician Zhou only had a superficial understanding of what it meant to be a person with no regard for his own life.

Today, however, he finally gained a profound understanding of what that truly meant.

The person in front of him was half alive at best. His pulse and his breathing were both weak, and his injuries were gruesome. Still, he remained completely calm and composed as the physician removed any decaying flesh and scattered medicinal powder over his wounds. He even had the energy to continue threatening Physician Zhou throughout the exam, warning the physician not to get any ideas about tricking him and stealing a second dose of the antidote.

Naturally, Physician Zhou didn't dare to do such a thing, and he continued to fearfully tend to Huo Wujiu's wounds.

Huo Wujiu had shed the top half of his robe, revealing the whip marks crisscrossing his toned, muscular upper body. The flesh was mangled and torn, with new wounds layered atop older ones. Few of the wounds had scabbed over, perhaps because the instruments of torture had been dipped in salt water, and many showed slight signs of festering.

The state of his body was a testament to the difficulty of enduring the conditions inside the imperial prison. He had spent over a month in there, but each day must have passed by like a year.

Anyone else would have been rendered immobile by now, if they managed to stay alive in the first place. Yet this man behaved as if he weren't hurt at all. When he was fully clothed and his injuries hidden, the only thing about him that suggested otherwise was his somewhat sickly complexion.

Throughout all the years that Physician Zhou had practiced medicine, he had never seen someone with such an iron will before.

It was often said that should a man be so ruthless to himself, he would never show mercy to another. Thus, Physician Zhou didn't even think to question the authenticity of the "poison" that had been administered to him. He could only accept his fate and resign himself to the fact that he would most likely have to obey all orders from Huo Wujiu from now on.

The treatment process lasted for a long time. It finally came to an end when Huo Wujiu's upper body was almost entirely swathed in gauze.

"Your injuries are grave, and you have already lost much blood. When the wounds begin to heal, there is a high likelihood that they will become hot and inflamed. In serious cases, it can endanger your life. I will prescribe you some medicine for oral consumption. You—"

"Examine my legs," Huo Wujiu interrupted suddenly.

Cut off in the middle of his sentence, Physician Zhou took a moment to gather his scrambled thoughts before he realized what Huo Wujiu was asking.

Not allowing him the time to respond, Huo Wujiu quietly bent over and yanked up his own robe with one hand while rolling up his pants with the other.

His legs were long, slender, and perfectly straight, and at first glance they appeared to be quite strong and toned. However, beneath the bruises and blood, grisly wounds were visible on his legs, deep enough to expose bone.

Those injuries were the result of having his flesh sliced open and his tendons severed.

Physician Zhou only glanced at them for a second before he swiftly averted his gaze in alarm. He didn't need to look any longer than that to evaluate such injuries. He was a relatively skilled doctor, but he wasn't a miracle worker, and he could see immediately that they were nigh incurable.

He looked back at Huo Wujiu.

Those deep-set black eyes were gazing calmly at the flayed flesh of those wounds.

So calmly that even Physician Zhou felt afraid.

“Will I be able to stand again?” Huo Wujiu asked.

Physician Zhou hesitated, afraid that the general might shoot the messenger.

“Allow me to bandage your legs as well. It will be tricky if the wounds get infected.”

He cautiously avoided responding directly to Huo Wujiu's question, which Huo Wujiu understood to be an answer in itself.

Huo Wujiu did not respond. Eventually, he nodded and let go of the fabric in his grip. Then he straightened up and leaned back in the wheelchair once more.

He was extremely quiet.

Physician Zhou didn't have the courage to gauge his expression again. But as he bent forward and approached Huo Wujiu to tend to the injuries on his legs, he caught a glimpse of his hands, which were atop his knees.

The muscles tensed and veins bulged from the backs of his hands as his fingers curled into tight fists, reopening the old cuts on his palms.

After his concession, Jiang Suizhou could distinctly sense the emperor's satisfaction. He radiated a malicious sort of joy. Moreover, that glee was not due to what Jiang Suizhou had said, but rather, the unhappiness that was displayed on his face while he had said it.

The emperor seemed to carry an unusual amount of malice toward him, and he was particularly fond of using Jiang Suizhou's suffering as the basis for his own merriment.

The matter came to a close once Jiang Suizhou relented, as was to be expected. Simultaneously, the emperor seemed to lose all interest in the court. A few officials had reports to submit to him, but after he finished listening to their statements with a lukewarm attitude, he waved his hand and said the Grand Chancellor would make the final decision. The morning audience did not last long, and it ended with the emperor's bored yawns.

The court already appeared to be under Pang Shao's control.

Jiang Suizhou pressed his lips together as he departed Guangyuan Hall with the rest of the officials.

The emperor's main reason for attending the assembly had seriously been just to ridicule Jiang Suizhou. Incredible.

From what he had gathered, the emperor despised Huo Wujiu, but his feelings toward Jiang Suizhou weren't much more favorable. Right now, Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu were essentially bound by the same rope. This made it far too easy for the emperor to vent his anger—two birds with one stone.

Jiang Suizhou descended the stairs slowly, gaze lowered. As if his situation wasn't bad enough to begin with, things were quickly becoming complicated to an unexpected degree.

At that moment, someone brushed past him. Jiang Suizhou looked up to see an elderly official whose beard and hair were completely white. He seemed familiar somehow.

"Your Highness's choice was a bitter disappointment indeed!" the official said morosely.

When their eyes met, Jiang Suizhou was stunned.

To think that his historical portrait was this accurate!

The man chiding him was one of the few virtuous officials left in the final years of the Jing dynasty: the Grand Master of Ceremonies, Qi Min.

Qi Min was an experienced official who had served the Jing dynasty under three different emperors. He was conscientious and principled, upstanding and honest, and he was one of the few court officials near the end of the Jing dynasty who dared to take a stand against Pang Shao.

Jiang Suizhou stared at him, a little stupefied, and didn't respond right away. But Qi Min had no intention of sparing his feelings. He shot a withering look at Jiang Suizhou and flicked his sleeves before continuing.

"Your Highness, how could you yield?" he demanded. "You've squandered the painstaking efforts of your fellow officials in the Ministry of Rites, all for the sake of saving your own face!"

Immediately after saying his piece, he began to storm away.

Unexpectedly, what Jiang Suizhou had guessed earlier during the assembly was correct.

He may have appeared to be nothing more than an idle, indolent prince, but to a small subset of the court, he was much more. Those court officials who had remained silent in the hall seemed to—perhaps subconsciously—regard him as their backbone. Qi Min's rebuke only served as further proof of that.

Jiang Suizhou came to his senses. He had to address this now. Staying quiet and doing nothing at a time like this wasn't the right move.

Court officials always formed coalitions for a specific purpose. Since even Qi Min had gotten himself involved in this mess, that meant that their objective was most likely to oppose Pang Shao.

He still had to interact with these people for three more years. If he didn't placate them now, they might conspire to kill him before Huo Wujiu ever even got the chance.

Thus, he had to successfully fool them first.

It shouldn't be too hard to deal with Qi Min here. When it came down to it, even with all his experience and his title, he was merely an official in charge of rites and ancestral temples. Despite the high rank, he

didn't hold any real power, and since he was so upstanding, he also didn't try to further his own interests and fight for power and profit.

This kind of person was relatively easy to frighten.

Qi Min had pulled away from him, but Jiang Suizhou caught up in a few quick strides.

"Grand Master, do you think I did that purely to save face?" he said in a low voice.

Qi Min's footsteps slowed when he heard Jiang Suizhou's question.

Jiang Suizhou merely scoffed and adopted an enigmatic tone of voice.

"If the Grand Chancellor is bold enough to publicly manipulate His Majesty into challenging me for that commission today, do you really believe that he would back down if I refused?" he said. "The construction of the temple concerns our ancestors. If anything ends up going *awry*, Grand Master, neither you nor I could afford to take responsibility for it."

As anticipated, Qi Min didn't speak again.

Jiang Suizhou chuckled lightly before he quickened his pace and swept past him.

"Grand Master, my intention was hardly to avoid humiliation," he said. "On the contrary, I was trying to protect everyone else."

After uttering that cryptic remark, he strode off without looking back.

Generally, it was most effective to leave things half unspoken, superficially plausible in a way that would cause the other person to speculate and mull over his words.

This was especially true when the person in question was a conservative old man stuck in his ways.

Once Jiang Suizhou climbed into the horse-drawn carriage waiting outside Kaiyang Gate, he surreptitiously looked back just in time to see Qi Min halt in front of Zhengyang Gate. He wore a grave but unreadable expression, and he seemed to be deep in thought.

Jiang Suizhou really had fooled him.

A smile tugged uncontrollably at the corners of his lips.

Even though he was currently caught in a hopeless deadlock—with a wolf in front of him and a tiger on his heels, each one's maw aiming for his throat—he still managed to find some joy in the depths of his misfortune.

It was actually quite entertaining, getting to frighten that esteemed, loyal official whose name would eventually be etched in history. The old man most likely wouldn't be able to eat well for several days after returning home, all because of a few vague, equivocal comments made by Jiang Suizhou.

That kind of feeling was rather intoxicating.

While it was true that he had originally chosen to take the academia route because it allowed him to be a lazy bum disguised as a high-level intellectual, he'd chosen to specialize in history because it was his passion.

He'd grown up in a chaotic household. His father took full advantage of the moderate wealth he earned and changed wives more frequently than he changed cars. Not only were there numerous children in the house, they each had a different mother, and the children began to band together and form alliances at a very young age. Jiang Suizhou was somewhat

unfortunate. He was his mom's only child, and he was a little too gentle and quiet.

While his father's other children were all busy scheming and conspiring at home, Jiang Suizhou would hide in his room and read.

But books were just books; nothing more than characters on a page. Now here he was, witnessing with his own eyes those famous historical figures walking and talking and living their lives. Despite his predicament, it really was hard to not find that utterly fascinating.

Jiang Suizhou had always excelled at amusing himself while under duress.

He let the curtain drop again and sat back in his seat, his mood considerably improved, bordering on cheerful.

The carriage set off. The colorful embroidered curtains fluttered in the breeze, allowing him to take in the sights through the gaps. At the same time, he started to plan.

He couldn't neglect the other court officials, but the most important person of all was still the one in his residence: Huo Wujiu. Since Jiang Suizhou was from the future, he knew all the major spoilers for this story. He knew that no matter how fierce the feuding and collusion within the imperial court might get, the Jing dynasty would still be conquered and destroyed in three years.

In that case, there wasn't really a point in risking his life to fight with Pang Shao. As long as he appeased his allied officials and bluffed his way through the next three years, that would be sufficient.

The carriage swayed as it made its way through the wide roads of Lin'an before turning onto Qinghe Ward and stopping in front of the Prince

of Jing's residence.

Jiang Suizhou climbed out of the carriage and headed for his living quarters in Anyin Hall.

His job was very laid-back, and he didn't even need to report to his ministry's office for work on the days the Grand Assembly was held. Since he had the time, he wanted to hurry to the Prince of Jing's study to look through his letters and bookkeeping records to better understand his circumstances.

However, at the entrance to Anyin Hall, a maidservant on the verge of tears blocked his path. She was dressed exquisitely and appeared to be someone's personal attendant.

"Your Highness! Earlier this morning, Madam Gu was treated unjustly and is weeping at this very moment. Your servant humbly requests Your Highness step in and intervene!"

Jiang Suizhou was startled.

Madam Gu? Who was that?

"What happened?" he asked sternly, frowning.

"This morning, when Madam Huo was moving to new living quarters, he happened to encounter my mistress," she explained hurriedly. "Madam Gu merely exchanged a few casual remarks with him, and then Madam Huo laid a hand upon my mistress and even injured him!"

Jiang Suizhou's relaxed, mild expression slowly stiffened again.

So, the original Prince of Jing had not only married Huo Wujiu, but he kept other concubines in the harem. That was a bit of a surprise. Even

more startling, though, was the fact that men apparently also engaged in this sort of intra-harem drama.

Chapter 8

THE SERVANTS TASKED with moving Huo Wujiu to new living quarters arrived while Physician Zhou was still treating his wounds.

As Huo Wujiu had initially come to the residence alone, he didn't have a dowry or belongings to speak of, for obvious reasons. Thus, along with a tall and strong porter boy to assist with manual labor, only two maidservants showed up for the move.

These maids had been assigned to Huo Wujiu to serve as his attendants. They entered the room wearing somewhat unpleasant expressions, and they kept their eyes lowered, clearly displaying a standoffish attitude.

"Physician Zhou, how much longer will it take?" one of the maids asked.

They didn't bother to bow in greeting or even acknowledge Huo Wujiu in the slightest. In fact, they behaved as if they hadn't seen him at all.

"Please wait a moment, young ladies. It will only be a few more minutes," Physician Zhou replied, still focused on dressing Huo Wujiu's wounds.

"Be quick with it, then," she said with a dramatic sigh. "We'll be waiting outside."

The two maids and the porter exited the room and filed out into the hallway. Carelessly, they left the door wide open behind them as they began to gossip and commiserate.

“So annoying,” grumbled the maid who hadn’t spoken earlier. “It’ll be noon if we wait any longer, and we’re going to be in the sun again on the way there.”

“Tell me about it,” agreed the other maid. “We’re so damn unlucky.”

At that, the first maid giggled a little.

“Unlucky? How can getting some sunshine be considered unlucky? Now this assignment we’re stuck with, that’s what you call unlucky.”

“No kidding. Who would want to wait upon a cripple from an enemy nation? We really do have the worst luck...”

They made no attempt to speak even a little bit more quietly, like they didn’t care if the people in the room heard them or not. Their bright, crisp voices were vividly transmitted to Physician Zhou’s ears.

His legs began to tremble.

Were they ignorant of who Huo Wujiu was? The physician was well aware that the man sitting in front of him was cold-blooded and ruthless, a demon who could kill someone without batting an eye.

Physician Zhou was so frightened that cold sweat broke out across his skin. Tentatively, he peered up at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu was still sitting in the same position as before, letting the sunlight fall gently across his expressionless face. He didn’t even bother looking up, as though he hadn’t heard their conversation.

Perhaps the sun was a little too bright. For whatever reason, Physician Zhou kept getting the impression that the motionless, incapacitated man in front of him should’ve been an exceedingly prideful person.

Afraid of saying something he shouldn't, Physician Zhou hastily looked away again and finished bandaging Huo Wujiu's legs properly.

"The wounds mustn't come in contact with water, and the medicine should be reapplied every three days. I will faithfully inform His Highness of the current situation," said Physician Zhou.

Huo Wujiu didn't reply.

After tidying up his medicine chest, Physician Zhou quietly withdrew from the room.

The two servant girls came back inside shortly following his departure. They instructed the porter boy to push the wheelchair as they escorted him to his future living quarters.

The wheelchair was somewhat unwieldy.

Having been fashioned to transport a prisoner of war, it was large and heavy, shoddily slapped together with little care. As a matter of fact, its wheels had been disassembled from the prisoner wagon and forcefully refitted onto the chair.

The two maids, insistent on shirking their responsibilities and not wanting to put up with the sun, were adamant about taking a shortcut. It wound through the landscape gardens between the ceremonial hall and the rear courtyards where the concubines resided, and its scenery changed with every step. Filled with streams and ponds, the garden was only connected by small bridges and narrow gravel trails.

The porter boy, strong and robust as he was, began to struggle to push the wheelchair across such terrain. Soon, he started to lag behind the two maids.

As the maids were so preoccupied with arriving at their destination, they did not immediately notice, and when they finally glanced back a few moments later, their annoyance spilled over.

Already full of resentment because they had been assigned to serve Huo Wujiu, as the two maids advanced back toward him with irritation, they realized that their new master hadn't said a single word thus far. Spurred by this, they grew increasingly brazen, having concluded that not only was he disabled, he was an easily manipulated pushover.

"Why are you going so slowly? Are you some delicate, noble young lady, afraid of dirtying her embroidered shoes?" sneered one maid, swiveling around to face them.

The porter boy pushing the wheelchair was simpleminded and straightforward. Hearing her question, he grew so nervous that beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and he rushed to explain.

"Miss, please understand. The path really is difficult to navigate..."

"Were we talking to you?" the other maid interjected sardonically. "Come on. Hurry up."

If they weren't addressing him, then there was only one other person present.

The porter boy didn't dare to respond. He simply ducked his head and began dutifully pushing the wheelchair again. Unfortunately, due to his nervousness, the boy misjudged his movement and the wheelchair, which was quite wobbly to begin with, instantly tipped to a precarious angle.

But before it could topple over, the man who had remained quiet this entire time lifted his hand slightly and pressed down on the opposite armrest.

The wheelchair stabilized itself.

The porter boy promptly bowed and began to offer an apology and express his gratitude to his new master. All of a sudden, a languid voice rang out from ahead.

“What’s all this ruckus about?”

Upon raising his head, the porter boy saw two men standing underneath the weeping willow tree next to the pond in front of them, followed by a gaggle of servants and attendants. One of the men was clad in light blue robes, his facial features pale and delicately pretty. His appearance was gentle and refined like jade. The other was alluringly beautiful. Even though he was clearly a man, he carried himself in a way that emphasized his lithe figure, and he was dressed from head to toe in a surprising shade of red.

Those were the two original “madams” in the household.

The porter boy and the two maids quickly cupped their hands and bowed.

“Good morning, Madam Gu, Madam Xu.”

The person in red—Madam Gu—gestured for them to rise before he sauntered over leisurely, planting himself firmly on the only path forward.

“Ah, as it turns out it is our new Madam Huo, who just joined our household yesterday.”

He stopped in front of Huo Wujiu, who did not react to his presence in the slightest.

“How old is Madam Huo this year? About twenty-three, surely?” he asked. “In that case, a few years my junior. From now on, do feel free to

call me Gege⁹.”

With a cheery smile on his face, he did not move. Apparently he was going to refuse to step aside until Huo Wujiu acknowledged him.

Huo Wujiu didn't even bother to glance up.

The atmosphere became tense and awkward. The man in light blue—Madam Xu—decided it was time to intervene. He paused briefly before approaching Madam Gu.

“Let's go, Changyun.”

But Gu Changyun didn't seem to appreciate his interference very much.

“Xu Du, you mustn't let him have his way,” he replied in an unhurried tone, still smiling. “Despite being new to the household, he won't even greet his older brothers. How utterly improper!”

Xu Du glanced at Gu Changyun and frowned.

Gu Changyun extended his hand, reaching for Huo Wujiu's chin.

“But he does have quite a handsome, striking appearance, doesn't he? Lift your head, let Gege take a closer look—”

His voice abruptly cut off as suddenly, without ever looking up, Huo Wujiu struck. As if he had another eye on his forehead, his hand shot up and accurately seized Gu Changyun's wrist, stopping him in his tracks.

Then, Huo Wujiu tightened his grip and twisted until there was a brittle *crack*.

Jiang Suizhou really didn't want to have to deal with this mess.

He knew that the great General Huo wasn't the type of person to get jealous and compete for attention in the harem. He'd bet his head on that. The other concubine must have provoked him first. In that case, why did Jiang Suizhou have to go and get on Huo Wujiu's bad side just because of that concubine's goading?

So what if that man got hurt? What was the point of crying? Even female concubines knew to yank each other's hair during feuds. Someone struck you? Then strike them back, if you can!

Jiang Suizhou gazed coolly at the maidservant for a moment.

"I have important matters at hand," he said finally, his tone indifferent.

He sidestepped the maid to enter the courtyard, but to his surprise, the maid hurried forward and barred the way.

"Your Highness, Mistress is quite injured! According to the physician, that person would've broken Madam's wrist with just a tiny bit more force!"

Well, didn't that mean his wrist *wasn't* broken?

Jiang Suizhou looked up impatiently. Right as he was about to speak, he glimpsed Meng Qianshan's expression from the corner of his eye. The eunuch was simple and pure and all of his emotions were displayed plainly on his face, which made him an excellent gauge of Jiang Suizhou's behavior.

At the moment, Meng Qianshan was staring at him blankly in astonishment, as if he had done something impossible to understand.

The maidservant remained stalwart in his path, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She didn't seem afraid that he was going to lose his temper at all.

When Jiang Suizhou first transmigrated here yesterday evening, a servant girl merely knocking a basin against a table had been terrified, as if her life was on the line.

This maidservant's bold behavior was likely due to arrogance from being in his good graces.

And this "Madam Gu" person was likely one of the original prince's favored concubines.

Jiang Suizhou was truly at his wit's end. Clenching his teeth, he internally swore at the original owner of his body.

It's one thing if you're going to dote on men, but couldn't you have at least picked some that aren't such a pain to deal with?

He drew a deep breath to steady his nerves and began to talk himself through this. He was already here, and that was that. If nothing unexpected happened, he would remain here for quite a few more years to come. Even if he avoided them now, sooner or later, he would still have to face everyone in the original prince's household.

Every single one of them, including his messy, troublemaking concubines.

There was no getting around it.

"I will pay him a visit during the evening meal," he said evenly with a tilt of his head.

Half of her tears immediately vanished, and her weepy expression transformed into a bright smile as she thanked him and bowed to him. Meng Qianshan, standing nearby, also seemed to exhale in relief and smile brighter.

Everyone was happy now—except for Jiang Suizhou. A bitter taste lingered in his mouth.

He turned on his heel and quickly marched himself into the original prince's study. Once there, he ordered everyone else out of the room and forbade any further entry.

Jiang Suizhou spent the rest of the afternoon utilizing the skills he had gained while pursuing higher education—specifically, researching and analyzing historical documents—and he unearthed a treasure trove of ledgers and letters.

As he had suspected, the original prince had actually been conspiring with numerous court officials, under the cover of his idle, laid-back facade.

But because Pang Shao currently possessed immense influence over the court and had many loyal followers, the original prince still hadn't been able to achieve many of his goals. Jiang Suizhou could tell that he had been laboriously planning and making arrangements but was only able to rope in some relative political outsiders and lone wolves, who didn't pose a threat at all in Pang Shao's eyes. Presumably, this was also why Pang Shao never considered it worth his time or energy to take action against the Prince of Jing.

Jiang Suizhou also managed to dig up some information about the other two concubines in his household.

One was named Xu Du, with whom the prince had a brief fling after relocating south to Lin'an. The other, Gu Changyun, was a male prostitute whom he had purchased from a brothel a few years back.

Xu Du wasn't particularly favored, but he got along fairly well with Gu Changyun, who very much was. The original prince spoiled Gu Changyun terribly. Every few days, he went to rest in Gu Changyun's rooms, and he refused to allow any other servants to accompany him.

Another observation of note to Jiang Suizhou was that the original prince used to have many more concubines in the household. Some he had brought back himself, while others were given to him by fellow officials.

However, in the span of a few short years, almost all of them either fell ill and died or were punished. Eventually, only Xu Du and Gu Changyun remained.

Jiang Suizhou frowned.

He hadn't expected the original prince to be so ruthless. It seemed that the servants in the residence feared him for good reason.

The sun climbed slowly to the center of the sky before inching just as slowly back down. The orange-tinged light filtered through the paper covering the windows, bathing the room in a warm layer of liquid gold.

Meng Qianshan knocked on the door to inform Jiang Suizhou that it was time for the evening meal. After putting away the correspondence, Jiang Suizhou left the study and got into the palanquin that Meng Qianshan had arranged for him in advance.

On the way to Madam Gu's living quarters, he came up with a plan for how to take care of the situation.

The original prince may have been a cut-sleeve, but he wasn't. He also wasn't the type to lay a hand on someone else's concubine—even though he had now turned into that “someone else.”

Since this Gu Changyun came from a brothel, he likely didn't have much power or influence. He was simply an unimportant concubine in the house of the Prince of Jing. Thus, Jiang Suizhou planned to let him cry and complain to his heart's content, while he himself remained quiet and stone-faced.

After a while of this, he would act as if he had gotten fed up with the weeping, after which he would admonish him a little and leave the room with a haughty flourish of his sleeves. From that point on, Jiang Suizhou would use this incident as an excuse to ignore him as much as possible. If he claimed to find the feuding in the harem distasteful and unpleasant, he could sweep this entire matter under the rug.

His plans crafted and his mental preparations made, all he needed now was to wait for the other man to start wailing.

Copying the original prince's behavior, Jiang Suizhou dismissed the servants before he walked into Gu Changyun's courtyard. However, when he opened the door to his room, an unexpected scene greeted him.

Predictably, Gu Changyun was lounging lazily on a couch in the inner chamber, cradling his bandaged wrist in his other hand.

Less predictably, Xu Du was sitting next to him.

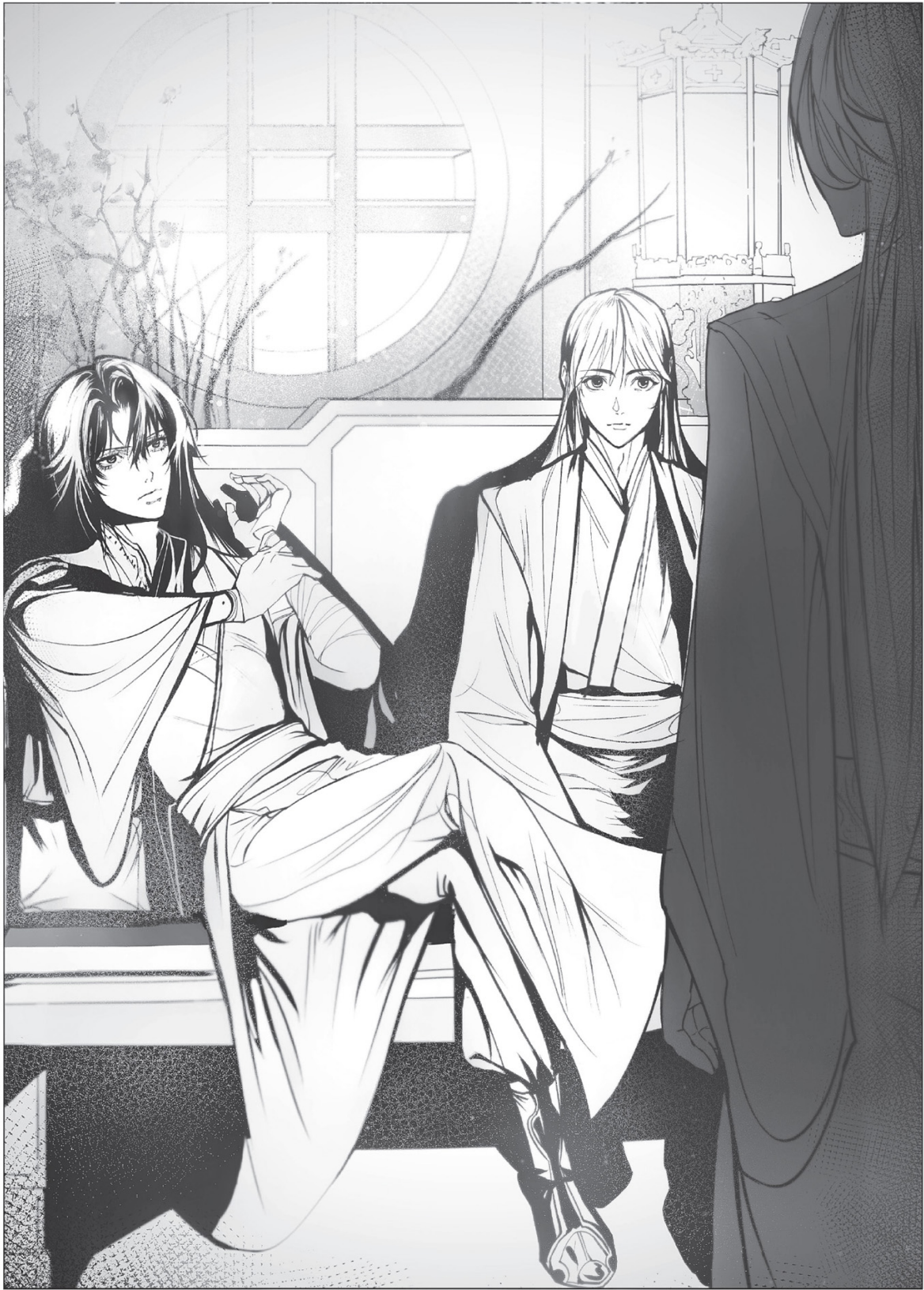
Upon Jiang Suizhou's arrival, Xu Du stood up and bowed in his direction with cupped hands.

While Madam Gu seemed to be exceedingly familiar with Jiang Suizhou, he showed no signs of the fawning or coquettish behavior that one

would expect from the brothel's rumored bewitching "fox spirit."

Madam Gu stood to greet him with a smile.

"Your subordinate suffered greatly today to create an excuse to see you, Your Highness. General Huo truly doesn't hold back."



Chapter 9

BEHIND THE RESIDENCE'S expansive, elaborate garden were the courtyards. The numerous uniquely designed buildings were divided into different compounds where the prince's concubines lived.

The Prince of Jing's residence formerly belonged to one of Lin'an's ultrawealthy despots. The entire complex occupied a considerable amount of land, and it was also exceptionally lavish. When the imperial court fled to Lin'an to avoid being taken over by the Liang army, this particular despot feared his wealth would draw unwanted attention and cost him his life. He willingly surrendered a good amount of his fortune to the imperial court, including what would become the Prince of Jing's residence.

However, since the despot housed several generations of his ever-growing family within the complex, it was far too large for the Prince of Jing to fill up with his own household. As a result, many of the buildings in the rear courtyards were unoccupied, and because they had been unoccupied for quite some time, more than a few of them had fallen into disrepair.

In the corner of the complex, a few feeble lights flickered to life in an old, dilapidated courtyard as nightfall approached.

The door creaked open as a maid entered. Then, stepping over the threshold, she strode into the room with a container of food. The main hall of this building wasn't particularly large, and it had been a long while since someone had last tidied it up. Her movements disturbed the dormant dust so that it filled the air, suffusing it with a suffocating feeling.

Wrinkling her nose in disdain, she picked up the pace. She hurried over to the table in the center of the room and placed the container heavily down on the surface.

“Dinner is here. Help yourself, Mistress.”

In the quiet of the night, her frigid voice was extremely grating to the ear. There was a hint of ridicule underlying the form of address she’d chosen.

The man in the wheelchair didn’t say anything in response.

The maid noticed early on that not only was he disabled, he was also mute. He wouldn’t react to anything except physical touch. As long as nobody tried to touch him, it didn’t matter how poorly he was treated. She could say or do anything else she liked without repercussion.

This naturally made him the perfect punching bag.

The maid had only been in the Prince of Jing’s residence for a couple of months, and, after much difficulty, she finally received an opportunity to serve a master.

Not all masters were equal, however. All the concubines in the household were masters, but not all were desirable ones. For instance, Madam Xu wasn’t a very good assignment to get. Madam Gu, on the other hand, was a much more valuable one. The maid had been searching for a way into Madam Gu’s courtyard in the hope of becoming one of his attendants, but then suddenly she found herself assigned to this wheelchair-bound invalid instead.

What good would come out of attending to this feeble concubine, who had been stashed away in a drafty, run-down building?

Resentment filled the young maid. Just the sight of the wheelchair felt like another reminder of her bad luck.

When she saw that, as usual, Huo Wujiu wasn't going to speak, she lashed out.

"I guess you wouldn't have heard yet," she said with a sneer, "but immediately after you struck Madam Gu, his personal attendant went to lodge a complaint with His Highness. As soon as His Highness heard of the incident, he announced that he was going to pay a visit to Madam Gu tonight."

Huo Wujiu didn't move.

"Do you have any idea who Madam Gu is? Do you think His Highness will let you get away with harming his darling?" she shrieked, her voice growing louder and shriller with each word. "When His Highness punishes you as you deserve, it's highly likely that your servants will be dragged down with you. As if it's not bad enough to get such an awful assignment in the first place! But to have an incident like this on my very first day... What rotten luck!"

Once she finished her rant, she huffed and stormed off toward the door. There, she paused to deliver one last barb.

"To think a cripple like you would dare to lay a hand on someone else," she spat. "You're really overestimating your own abilities."

She slammed the door shut behind her.

Huo Wujiu slowly closed his eyes.

He'd developed a fever a while ago due to the assortment of injuries which his body was struggling to heal. His forehead was burning up, and fog threatened to gradually engulf his mind.

Still, he was very much awake.

Deep within him, there was a snarling beast trapped by the cramped cage of rationality, the metal bars chafing its skin raw and bloody.

He'd only ever had to endure pain—never indignity.

He knew that in this world, it was winner takes all, and it went without saying that the defeated and downtrodden were mistreated. By that same token, he also knew that he had to keep hope alive and maintain his resolve for vengeance; as long as he was still breathing, his debts would one day be repaid in blood. All pain eventually subsided with a little endurance.

Still, he had never realized that one could kill a tiger without a blade. All that was needed was to simply injure and imprison it, then toss a handful of inescapable maggots onto its wounds.

No matter how powerful it was, it would die on its own, bit by bit.

There was no way for it to fight back.

As Jiang Suizhou stared at the two concubines, stunned, Gu Changyun stepped forward and invited him to sit down.

“Your Highness, what actions did Pang Shao take today in the court assembly?”

Jiang Suizhou was blindsided by Gu Changyun's question.

He had thought up many different possibilities, yet it had never occurred to him that this “fox spirit” wasn't a fox spirit at all, nor was that short-lived fling actually a fling. On the contrary, they were close advisors

that the original prince had kept in the residence under the guise of being concubines.

In a flash, many things suddenly made much more sense.

So the original prince was only pretending to be a cut-sleeve. His cunning plan was plain as day now: He had done it to pull the wool over the emperor and Pang Shao's eyes. It was a genius way to throw them off the scent and reduce their apprehensions toward him. Meanwhile, the concubines who had allegedly died as a result of his brutality and cruelty were, in all likelihood, spies placed into his household to gather dirt. Hence, they all perished tragically at the hands of the original prince.

For a moment, Jiang Suizhou actually found himself admiring the original prince a little.

Enduring humiliation, suffering in silence, all for the sake of crafting meticulous schemes—if he had been the one on the throne, perhaps the Jing dynasty wouldn't have met its demise so quickly.

Jiang Suizhou slowly sat down in the centermost wooden armchair while processing the enormous wave of new information. He mulled over his phrasing for a moment, determined to speak concisely.

“Through His Majesty, he seized the construction rights for the ancestral temple back from me.”

He then took a sip of the tea that Gu Changyun had just poured for him.

It was only now, sitting in Gu Changyun's room, that he noticed how dry his mouth was. He'd been so absorbed in reading through all the documents in his study that he'd forgotten to drink any water all afternoon.

The room remained silent, even after Jiang Suizhou drank a few sips of tea. Neither of the other two men said anything.

He set down the cup and looked in their direction, which seemed to prompt Xu Du to speak.

“Although the construction of the ancestral temple isn’t too consequential, several high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Rites fought hard to secure the commission...” He trailed off, unhurried. “Has it truly already been snatched away by Pang Shao?”

Xu Du had a gentle appearance, and his expression was also calm and composed. Merely conversing with him gave the impression of being enveloped in the spring breeze, and Jiang Suizhou subconsciously relaxed a bit.

“When His Majesty personally demands it, nothing else can be done.”

“Since he went through His Majesty, it was indeed difficult for Your Highness to refuse,” agreed Gu Changyun. “Though it is a pity that the funds will end up in Pang Shao’s hands once again.”

“More opportunities will arise in the future; we simply have to wait,” Xu Du said placatingly. “However, Your Highness, were you able to pacify those in the Ministry of Rites?”

“A good point. Those officials did quite a lot to help Your Highness obtain the commission,” Gu Changyun said with a nod. “Should you offend them, they may engage in blackmail. All of the correspondence that Your Highness has had with them as of late will become something they can hold over you.”

Both of them flicked their eyes to the side and gazed back at Jiang Suizhou.

Everything they said was clear and logical, and they didn't mince their words. Evidently, judging by the way they spoke, the original prince always shared the information that he received with the two of them. They must have been exceptionally trustworthy advisors to him.

Of course, the prerequisite for this assumption was that they hadn't realized that the Prince of Jing had been replaced by a fake.

Bearing that in mind, Jiang Suizhou decided to be more prudent than usual and carefully note down everything they said, as well as the names of the officials involved.

Then he nodded in response to Gu Changyun's question.

"I am aware. I informed Grand Master Qi as such earlier today."

Xu Du and Gu Changyun both returned the nod politely.

Jiang Suizhou proceeded to give them a simple summary of the other reports that had been submitted during the court assembly. Fortunately, seeing as the emperor was an incompetent fool, nothing useful had been discussed during the previous assembly, and Jiang Suizhou didn't have to think too hard about connecting the dots. They began naturally and thoughtfully discussing the intel with him.

They were primarily concerned with what Pang Shao would do next, given the current situation in the court, as well as any opportunities that could open up in their favor. The prince and his allies should be prepared to interfere with Pang Shao's machinations whenever possible, and hopefully profit.

As the conversation went on, it gradually dawned on Jiang Suizhou that these two people were most likely the original prince's "think tank." They analyzed and extrapolated the intel for him, after which he made the final decision.

But because the original prince didn't have a significant amount of influence or power, he had to resort to rather underhanded means to oppose Pang Shao. Case in point: the ancestral temple commission. The original prince had also planned to embezzle from the project, of course, and the only difference between him and Pang Shao was where the money ultimately went.

Jiang Suizhou could understand his reasoning. After all, at this point in the game, it was useless to stubbornly insist on remaining pure and righteous in the court. Hardly anyone else was, to be sure.

He listened attentively to Xu Du and Gu Changyun's advice, taking note of the relevant information to use later in times of trouble.

Time trickled by. A good portion of the lamp oil had already been consumed by the time they wrapped up their discussion.

There was a lull in the conversation. A little thirsty from all the talking, Jiang Suizhou drank some more of his tea. Then, abruptly, Gu Changyun spoke once more.

"Your Highness... What is your opinion of Huo Wujiu?" he asked, massaging his wrist a little.

Jiang Suizhou blinked.

What's that supposed to mean? Don't tell me you want to compete with him for my "favor"!

He looked at Gu Changyun silently for a moment, at a loss for words.

Still holding his wrist, Gu Changyun burst out laughing.

“Please don’t overthink it, Your Highness. Your subordinate, along with Xu Du, did some probing earlier today. We’ve concluded that there are some matters concerning Huo Wujiu”—he paused briefly, either for thought or dramatic effect—“that His Highness will have to take care of himself.”

Puzzled, Jiang Suizhou tipped his head to the side and indicated for him to continue.

Gu Changyun exchanged a glance with Xu Du before elaborating.

“Throughout the past few years, Pang Shao and His Majesty have sent a number of their people here, all of whom Your Highness dispatched quite handily. We’re currently the only two left in the household, and we were both scouted by you personally... As such, when Pang Shao offered the suggestion to His Majesty to give Huo Wujiu to you, Your Highness, to serve as your concubine, he likely intended to test you a little more.”

“You mean...” Jiang Suizhou trailed off with a frown.

Gu Changyun nodded.

“His Majesty has set the matter aside for now, but Pang Shao continues to doubt His Highness’s cut-sleeve tendencies,” he continued. “All the people he sneaked in here before were spies, but Huo Wujiu is different. He isn’t aligned with His Majesty or Pang Shao, and his looks are exceptional. It’s likely that Pang Shao will send someone over to nose around and see if Your Highness will...*dote* on Huo Wujiu regardless.”

Jiang Suizhou was baffled.

Huh? You want me to “dote” on Huo Wujiu to prove I’m a cut-sleeve? Why not chop off my head right now and be done with it?

“So if I don’t dote on Huo Wujiu, that proves I’m not truly a cut-sleeve?” he protested instantly. “This is unbefitting.”

Xu Du, who had remained quiet thus far, suddenly cut in.

“But if Your Highness does dote on him a bit, that will surely solidify your cut-sleeve identity. If not, Pang Shao’s faction will most likely try to slip in even more of their spies before long. Should Your Highness continue to kill every new arrival, the truth will surely be exposed sooner rather than later.”

“After much deliberation, we believe this is the most appropriate course of action,” Gu Changyun added, dipping his head in agreement. “There’s no need to worry, Your Highness. All you must do is spend the night at Huo Wujiu’s residence with some frequency, just for a while.”

Jiang Suizhou sighed. The implication here was that it didn’t matter if Jiang Suizhou actually did anything with Huo Wujiu or not. He just had to put on a sufficient show to demonstrate to Pang Shao that he would still sleep with a man he loathed, provided that man was handsome enough.

“Tonight would be a fine choice,” Xu Du chimed in again. “Since Changyun just had a disagreement with Huo Wujiu, it would make sense for His Highness to pay him a visit as well.”

Both of them turned their attention to Jiang Suizhou, their expressions extremely grave. Jiang Suizhou stared back in silence.

He had crafted so many different plans and thought of so many variables. He’d been so sure he had the perfect setup to avoid sleeping with the original prince’s concubines.

Who could’ve guessed that those concubines would look at him with beseeching eyes and plead for him to sleep with Huo Wujiu instead?

Chapter 10

THE DOOR OPENED AND CLOSED once more as Jiang Suizhou departed.

Gu Changyun strolled back over to Xu Du, picked up his cup of tea, and sat down next to him.

“The night is still young, you know. Shall we play a game before you leave?” he said lazily, blowing at the stray leaves floating atop his tea.

Xu Du didn’t reply.

Gu Changyun lifted his gaze to find an appraising look on Xu Du’s face. They had been working together for some time, and Gu Changyun knew him well enough by now. He could understand what was on his mind with a single glance.

He let out a huff of laughter.

“You noticed as well,” Xu Du said. It wasn’t a question but an assertion.

That person was clearly His Highness, but at the same time, he most certainly was not.

Both of their lives were at His Highness’s mercy, which was why he never feared that they would betray him, nor did he feel the need to put on a mask in front of them. In other words, he would never treat the two of them so calmly or pleasantly. Especially not now, right after Pang Shao had stolen his hard-earned commission. He was far too composed.

As for Huo Wujiu, well, His Highness should have utterly despised him by default.

Because His Majesty had issued the edict and arranged the marriage, even though His Highness had never seen Huo Wujiu before, he redirected all of his hatred for Pang Shao and the emperor onto Huo Wujiu. He also loathed the fact that he couldn't do to Huo Wujiu what he'd done to all the other spies and have his body thrown into a mass grave.

After all, to His Highness, Huo Wujiu was just a symbol of the emperor's wanton humiliation, and every day he remained in the prince's residence represented another day spent under the heel of that waste of space.

Thus, Xu Du knew right away that Gu Changyun was trying to test His Highness with his suggestion.

Gu Changyun put down the cup.

"Noticed what? Was that not His Highness just now?"

His tone was breezy. As he spoke, he pulled out a weiqi¹⁰ board and two baskets of stones—one white, one black—from underneath the table perched on the wooden couch. He set down one of the baskets next to Xu Du's hand.

"In any case, His Highness holds the lives of my entire family in his hands," Gu Changyun said as he leisurely picked through the stones. "So long as we unequivocally obey His Highness, we have no need to worry about other matters. Isn't that so?"

After placing a stone on the board, he looked up at Xu Du, his exquisitely beautiful, piercing eyes glimmering with excitement.

Jiang Suizhou was hoodwinked by Xu Du and Gu Changyun's persistent coaxing. After weighing the pros and cons, he ended up making his way to Huo Wujiu's living quarters.

They had a point—there was likely no end to the number of spies at the emperor's disposal, and he would continue to send them under the pretense of being concubines. It would become increasingly suspicious if he kept killing them. Moreover, as someone from the modern era unused to such bloodshed, he simply didn't have the stomach to do such things.

In that case, he had no choice but to draw support from Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou spent the entire journey fretting and becoming increasingly vexed. He realized regrettably that he'd backed himself into a corner.

Last night, he had warned Huo Wujiu not to bother him with his presence, yet what was he doing the very next day? Voluntarily running over to impose *his* presence upon Huo Wujiu instead. He was already starting to feel embarrassed, and he hadn't even seen Huo Wujiu yet.

The palanquin traveled for quite some time before it eventually approached a desolate, dismal courtyard. Jiang Suizhou peered out at the buildings.

The adjacent courtyard was quite dark, lit only by a few dim lamps that were presumably coming from the servants' rooms.

Unexpectedly, the palanquin came to a stop in front of this courtyard.

Jiang Suizhou raised his eyebrows as Meng Qianshan hurried over, all smiles, and reached up to help him down.

“We’ve arrived?” Jiang Suizhou asked as he climbed out of the litter, frowning.

“Yes! This is the residential compound that Your Highness specifically instructed be set aside for Madam Huo,” Meng Qianshan replied with a hasty nod. “Has Your Highness forgotten?”

Once Jiang Suizhou found his footing, he lifted his head and took in his surroundings.

From afar, these buildings blended seamlessly with the neighboring compounds, and there wasn’t anything notable about them. The bleakness was only noticeable in close quarters. Weeds grew unchecked, and several large trees with gnarled, unpruned branches sprawled menacingly across the courtyard. The ground was coated in a layer of detritus that Jiang Suizhou presumed to be leaves that had fallen the past autumn.

Due to the glimmer of light seeping from the rooms, Jiang Suizhou could faintly make out the damaged lattices and paper covering the windows, swaying and rustling in the breeze.

How could anyone live here?

Clearly, the original prince’s plan had been simply to stuff Huo Wujiu away in a derelict building in the farthest corner of the complex, with the hope he would never again appear before him in this lifetime. Not only did the prince fail to provide more than the barest minimum level of care, he deliberately made decisions that would cause Huo Wujiu to suffer during his time here.

Well, it made sense. To the Prince of Jing, Huo Wujiu was a traitor to the nation and an insult to him personally. While the original prince might have faced challenges and roadblocks in Southern Jing, his ambition

was only limited to seizing power from the emperor and Pang Shao. He would never consider involving Huo Wujiu—a traitor to Southern Jing—in his plans.

How was he supposed to know what Huo Wujiu would do three years later?

Jiang Suizhou had some mixed feelings on all of this, but he had to internally thank those two “concubines” of his.

If it weren’t for his timely visit today, he almost certainly would’ve taken the fall for the original prince again, causing Huo Wujiu to harbor yet another grudge against him.

He sighed soundlessly before he made a noise of agreement and answered Meng Qianshan.

“I must’ve mentioned it in passing,” he muttered. “I can’t remember anymore.”

Then he walked into the courtyard.

Meanwhile, Meng Qianshan clicked his tongue in astonishment.

Strange. How could His Highness not remember? It was only a few days ago that Meng Qianshan had asked where Madam Huo was to live, and he received a terrifyingly icy look in response. His Highness proceeded to instruct Meng Qianshan very specifically to shove Huo Wujiu somewhere far away, so he wouldn’t have to look at him.

It was quite an unexpected reversal, but Meng Qianshan recalled the way His Highness had behaved this morning and started to piece together an explanation. Perhaps it made sense after all? His Highness did previously despise Madam Huo, but that was before he had ever seen Madam Huo’s face.

Once His Highness spent the night with Madam Huo, his attitude shifted quite dramatically the next morning. It seemed that was all it took to soften the edges of his hatred. Naturally, his initial loathing didn't mean much anymore in the face of such affection.

Meng Qianshan quickly followed after Jiang Suizhou into the courtyard.

Not only was the elevation lower here, the flow of running water was also directed into the residence near this area. As soon as Jiang Suizhou entered the courtyard, he was struck with a distinctly damp chill; even the wind seemed to drop a few degrees in temperature.

This frail body of his really was too sensitive.

He headed straight for the building in the center of the compound. To his surprise, there wasn't a single person in sight on the veranda. Before he could say anything, though, Meng Qianshan called out.

"Where are all the people in this compound?" he demanded indignantly.

A moment later, two maidservants finally dashed out of a nearby room. Judging from their appearances, it seemed that they had already retired for the evening.

At the sight of Jiang Suizhou and Meng Qianshan, shock and fear flashed across their faces. They promptly rushed forward and knelt in front of Jiang Suizhou.

"Your Highness!" they gasped in terror.

Jiang Suizhou's brows knitted.

He may not have been accustomed to the rigid social hierarchy of the past, but he knew that an employee was supposed to fulfill their responsibilities once hired. Moreover, they absolutely shouldn't try to harass their employer.

And these maids were, without a shadow of a doubt, bullying Huo Wujiu.

Meng Qianshan caught sight of Jiang Suizhou's expression and jumped in to scold the maids again.

"Why wasn't anyone out here on night duty?" the eunuch snapped. "You two cast aside your master and went to sleep, just like that? Were you assigned here to serve a master or be one?"

Neither maid dared to lift her head, kowtowing repeatedly as they apologized for their transgressions.

Jiang Suizhou rubbed his temple. The original prince didn't die in the unofficial version of events simply because of his own poor survival instincts. It became increasingly clear to him that everyone in the entire residence also played a role in the events to come. They fawned excessively over those above them and belittled those they deemed beneath them, as if they were dead set on sowing discord and fanning the flames of animosity between him and Huo Wujiu.

"You take care of this," he told Meng Qianshan with a wave of his hand.

Then he turned and went inside.

Meng Qianshan swiftly took control of the situation.

"Guards! Take the two of them away and administer a beating with a bamboo cane. Tomorrow, return them to the selling agent, along with their

slave contracts. Let them be sold to whomever the agent pleases!”

The two maids were dragged away, wailing and sobbing.

But Jiang Suizhou couldn't spare a second thought for them, because the moment he stepped into the room, he choked and began to cough violently.

There was dust everywhere. It permeated the air so completely that a single breath was enough to take a heavy toll on Jiang Suizhou's weak lungs. He stood there in the hall for a good while, coughing so hard that the room seemed to spin around him, and tears welled up in his eyes.

Alarmed servants frantically followed him inside, with some supporting him and some pouring him tea. There was only so much they could do for him, however. They couldn't even find a suitable place for him to sit down, and the kettle on the table was only partially filled with cool water.

Everyone rushed around busily, trying to take care of him. Amid the chaos, Jiang Suizhou heard the faint sound of a wheelchair moving. The noise was extremely quiet, almost entirely drowned out by the servants' voices.

Someone helped him sit down nearby, and he was able to soothe the itch in his throat with some hot tea that the servants had gone to great lengths to acquire, quelling his coughing fit at last.

He finally opened his eyes, glazed with tears, and spotted Huo Wujiu sitting diagonally in front of him, head turned in his direction.

His dark eyes were like a whirlpool as he watched Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou involuntarily coughed a few more times, causing the reflex tears gathered in his eyes to spill over in response. As the tears fell,

Jiang Suizhou's vision cleared enough for him to see Huo Wujiu properly. He wasn't sure if he was imagining things, but those intense eyes seemed to be smothered under a haze.

However, Huo Wujiu broke eye contact a second later and didn't look at him again.

Jiang Suizhou was, at the moment, quite alluringly pitiful. He truly looked the part of an overly aloof, sickly beauty as he sat there, tears clinging to his eyelashes above delicate, red-rimmed eyes, bundled in a thick cloak. Naturally, he was unaware that when he gazed at someone with such glistening eyes, it was a bit ruinous, no matter how one chose to interpret it.

Once his coughing fit subsided, he pulled the cloak that Meng Qianshan had wrapped around him a little tighter.

"Meng Qianshan," he said steadily as he straightened up to look at him, "these are your so-called living arrangements?"

All that coughing had cleared his head, at least. He knew that he had to cast the blame on someone else first in order to take matters into his own hands and move Huo Wujiu to new living quarters.

Luckily, Meng Qianshan's immediate reaction worked perfectly for Jiang Suizhou's purposes. The eunuch dropped everything else and addressed him, quivering.

"An oversight! It was your humble servant's oversight," he exclaimed, instantly pleading guilty to the accusation. "Tomorrow... No, at once! Your servant will have someone tidy up another compound at once, so Madam Huo can relocate there!"

Jiang Suizhou hummed and drank some more tea.

It'd be best if he moved somewhere closer to me, Jiang Suizhou thought to himself. After all, he had accepted his advisors' suggestion, which meant that he would be visiting Huo Wujiu often in the coming days. Why not make it more convenient?

He paused in the middle of sipping tea.

Weren't there many vacant rooms in the compound where he lived—Anyin Hall?

He would be able to see Huo Wujiu on a daily basis, as well as prevent other people from secretly harassing him. Additionally, there would be plenty of ways to sneak back to his own room to sleep after paying a nighttime visit to Huo Wujiu, with Pang Shao's informants none the wiser. This way, he could have his cake and eat it too. It was really the perfect solution.

Jiang Suizhou's eyes lit up.

"There's no need for that. Move him to my living quarters," he said airily as he set down his cup.

All the nearby servants who heard his declaration were momentarily stunned, but Jiang Suizhou stood his ground. As the master of this residence, he didn't need to explain his decisions. He just had to assume an air of enigmatic mystery.

Except, as he nonchalantly shifted his gaze to gauge Huo Wujiu's reaction, he noticed something startling.

Under the dim lamplight, Huo Wujiu's complexion seemed to be a bit abnormal. One of his elbows was propped on the wheelchair's armrest, his hand straining to hold up his drooping head. He wasn't listening to Jiang Suizhou at all.

...Was he sick?

Chapter 11

Meng Qianshan wasn't able to proceed with Madam Huo's move that day. When his concerned master called out to Madam Huo several times and received no reply, Meng Qianshan himself rushed off to find the household physician.

Jiang Suizhou stayed in the room. He instructed the remaining servants to bring Huo Wujiu into the inner chamber and help him lie down on the bed. Huo Wujiu seemed to have a fever—and a rather severe one at that. Even though he was still sitting upright, his reactions had slowed significantly.

The only exception was when someone tried to touch him.

Just as a servant was about to touch his legs, he lifted his hand almost reflexively, and they stopped in their tracks, astonished.

Huo Wujiu lowered his eyes, responding in a hoarse voice, "I'll do it myself."

His tone was not aggressive. In fact, he sounded quite calm, yet he spoke with such authority that it brooked no room for refusal. The servant quickly glanced at Jiang Suizhou, waiting for a command. Jiang Suizhou was sitting nearby, but he wasn't looking at the servant; he was focused solely on Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu paid no attention to the onlookers, and he braced his hands against the armrests on his own. His slightly sluggish actions belied the movement's practiced nature. It was evident that he was immensely fatigued.

Pushing himself up, he slowly transferred himself onto the bed. Once there, he didn't lie down. Instead, he leaned ever so slightly to the side and propped himself up against the bedpost, still keeping his back very straight.

In spite of his silence, Jiang Suizhou could see that there was an innate sense of pride underlying his movements.

He paused. All of a sudden, the version of Huo Wujiu described in the history books came to mind.

Huo Wujiu was the son of the Jing dynasty's Marquis of Dingbei, born in Yangguan. He learned to ride and shoot a bow when he was six, and he hunted tigers when he was ten. Then, in the twentieth year of Emperor Ling of Jing's reign, when he was thirteen, his father staged an insurrection and raised troops to revolt against the state of Jing. In the twenty-second year of Emperor Ling of Jing's reign, his father perished in the Battle of Xunyang. Around the same time, Huo Wujiu's uncle—who had rebelled alongside Huo Wujiu's father—was also besieged by the Jing army.

Thus, it was young Huo Wujiu who took up command of the disoriented troops, broke through the tight encirclement, and saved his uncle. Despite being at a disadvantage, he emerged victorious and quickly made a name for himself. From then on, he continued to protect his uncle as he slowly climbed up the chain of command to become the Liang army's foremost general.

Prior to being taken prisoner, he was undefeated on the battlefield. He was as unstoppable as a sharpened blade cleaving through bamboo, and in four short years, he stormed Yecheng and drove the current emperor of Jing over the Yangtze River. Henceforth, Liang and Jing governed separately on opposite banks.

What a sight he must have been—a youthful general clad in fine armor, astride a spirited horse. Even though historians wielded their pens with impartiality, it was hard not to be awestruck by the legendary nature of his story and achievements.

That was a hero whom Jiang Suizhou had studied countless times before, separated by a span of a thousand years, through yellowing historical documents.

Huo Wujiu deserved to be a prideful person. He'd earned it.

Looking at him now, Jiang Suizhou suddenly understood why the emperor had cut the tendons in Huo Wujiu's legs.

It was the only way to make him kneel.

Lost in thought, Jiang Suizhou didn't realize that he was still staring at Huo Wujiu, nor did he notice that Huo Wujiu was in fact aware of his gaze, despite his muddleheadedness from the fever. Huo Wujiu returned the stare with slightly furrowed brows.

By the time Jiang Suizhou came to his senses, the look in Huo Wujiu's eyes had grown exceptionally unfriendly. His thoughts were written plainly across his face, and Jiang Suizhou read them easily enough.

Get lost already, he seemed to be saying.

At that, the emotions that had begun to stir in Jiang Suizhou's chest promptly vanished without a trace.

He averted his gaze, attempting to feign nonchalance. Fixing a stony expression upon his face, he stood, gathered his cloak in one hand, and walked over to the bed. He gazed imperiously down at Huo Wujiu, then turned to the nearby servants.

“Why hasn’t the physician arrived yet?” he demanded.

All the servants knew that His Highness had a bad temper and wasn’t easy to please. None of them dared to answer his question, the room suddenly silent.

However, only Jiang Suizhou knew that his question was not actually important. The truth was that he had felt embarrassed having Huo Wujiu stare at him like that, so he had hastily come up with an excuse to compensate for his awkwardness and reinforce his icy facade.

He gave Huo Wujiu a sidelong glance, only to find that the other man had already lowered his eyes. He wasn’t even looking at him anymore.

Sick as he was, he still knew just how to get under someone’s skin.

Fortunately, that was when Meng Qianshan burst into the room, puffing and panting. Beside him was Physician Zhou, carrying his medicine chest on his back.

He was greeted by the sight of His Highness standing next to the bed with a hard, flinty expression on his face, seemingly in some sort of a standoff with Huo Wujiu, who was sitting on the bed. Upon his entrance, His Highness turned his head slightly and stared at him with icy eyes.

Physician Zhou had always been rather timid, and he ducked his head, too scared to take another look in his direction.

“Come here and examine him,” His Highness ordered coolly.
“Considering how ill he is, he better not die in my residence.”

His voice was remarkably pleasing to the ear, his tone arrogant but measured. At the same time, there was an almost imperceptible wheezing

beneath it—the sign of someone in poor health, with deficiencies in the spleen-stomach qi,¹¹ resulting in a weakened immune system and fatigue.

Physician Zhou quickly acquiesced and stepped forward. He kept his eyes downcast, but by chance, he saw Huo Wujiu impassively lift his gaze and cast an unreadable glance at His Highness.

Just as Huo Wujiu was about to look away, something seemed to lure his attention, and he faltered slightly before he glanced at His Highness again.

Physician Zhou would have continued watching, but out of nowhere, he found himself the next target of those fierce, intimidating eyes.

Huo Wujiu had noticed his observations.

Even though those eyes were listless and unfocused, they still caused Physician Zhou to quiver in fear. He immediately looked away and walked primly over to Huo Wujiu. There, he set down the medicine chest and began examining him respectfully.

Jiang Suizhou sat back down.

To his side, Meng Qianshan proficiently refilled his cup with hot tea. He held the cup by Jiang Suizhou's hand and hesitated for a moment.

“Where will Your Highness be spending the night?” he asked tentatively.

Madam Huo certainly wouldn't be able to serve His Highness tonight in this condition. Moreover, he had a fever, and His Highness was susceptible to illness. What if the sickness spread to His Highness; what would they do then?

Jiang Suizhou gazed at Physician Zhou and didn't answer.

When Meng Qianshan saw that Jiang Suizhou didn't intend to respond, he waited quietly to the side and didn't press the issue.

A short while later, Physician Zhou turned around and knelt in front of Jiang Suizhou.

"Your Highness, Madam Huo is currently afflicted with a high fever, due to inflammation from his injuries," he reported in a rush. "Madam has had a fever for some time, actually, but he is quite good at enduring. Madam was grievously injured to begin with, and if he is not treated with haste, it may become life-threatening!"

"Is it that severe?" Jiang Suizhou asked, his brow wrinkling.

Physician Zhou nodded.

"Your humble servant will prepare the medicine at once, as well as change the dressing for Madam Huo momentarily. So long as the fever is brought down in a timely manner, there will be no lasting damage."

"Meng Qianshan will prepare the medicine," Jiang Suizhou said, and he dipped his head. "Go change his dressing now."

Physician Zhou swiftly assented.

Cradling his own cheek in hand, Jiang Suizhou tipped his head and looked back at Huo Wujiu.

Although Huo Wujiu still sat upright, he had already lost consciousness from the fever. His eyes, which had been shooting daggers at everyone in sight earlier, were now gently closed.

The physician carefully removed the bandages to clean the wounds. Fresh blood had soaked into the cloth, causing them to cling to the flesh

underneath. As the physician meticulously pulled away the dressing, it inevitably tugged at the wounds.

Above Huo Wujiu's closed eyes, his eyebrows were tightly furrowed. He pressed his lips together, holding back any sound of pain or surprise that might try to escape. The only indication that he was actually in any agony came from the way that his brows trembled when the bandages were torn away.

Abruptly, a childhood memory resurfaced in Jiang Suizhou's thoughts.

While living with his father, one of his younger half brothers pushed him down the stairs, and he twisted his ankle as a result. Since his mother had been quite depressed at the time and was always crying, he didn't dare let her find out. He ended up hobbling back to his room for the night without speaking a word of it to anyone. Though he tried to read to take his mind off of it, it couldn't divert his attention.

He keenly remembered how it felt to endure that pain all alone, with nothing but his books.

But this had already become routine for Huo Wujiu: a grim reality of life that was carved into his very bones.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't stop his gaze from lingering on Huo Wujiu. His entire body was covered in overlapping wounds, most of them quite deep and stained with fresh blood.

How much pain must he have been in?

Jiang Suizhou watched in silence as Physician Zhou cleaned Huo Wujiu's wounds and wrapped them in fresh bandages before helping him lie

down on the bed. Then the physician approached Jiang Suizhou and knelt to give his report.

“Your Highness, the dressing has been changed. After this, the madam only has to take his medicine. Cold washcloths should be applied regularly to lower his temperature, but once the fever subsides, he will be out of harm’s way.”

With a nod, Jiang Suizhou gestured for him to proceed.

The physician rushed off to prepare the washcloth. Not long after he placed it on Huo Wujiu’s forehead, Meng Qianshan returned with the medicine. He handed it to Physician Zhou and obediently returned to Jiang Suizhou’s side.

“Your Highness, it’s getting quite late. Why don’t you head back to Anyin Hall and get some rest?”

Jiang Suizhou did not respond immediately. Perceptive as ever, Meng Qianshan noticed that he was still watching Huo Wujiu.

“If Your Highness is concerned, your servant will leave some people here to keep watch,” he added quietly.

Jiang Suizhou hesitated.

He knew that Huo Wujiu wasn’t going to die from this, of course. There wasn’t anything to worry about.

But he realized that he was less concerned about the actual outcome than he was with Huo Wujiu’s current conditions. He couldn’t help but think of the Huo Wujiu in the history books, who had pushed through this all on his own, with no one to treat his wounds or change his dressings. How many days and nights of torment did he bear in order to seize his own life back from the jaws of death?

Perhaps because Jiang Suizhou knew what it felt like to suffer all by himself during a sickness or injury, he suddenly found himself a little reluctant to leave.

“Bring me a book,” he said finally, his tone even.

Meng Qianshan was so taken aback that he spoke without thinking.

“Your Highness, are you planning to stay...”

Jiang Suizhou shot a look at Meng Qianshan, cutting off the rest of his sentence. Meng Qianshan nodded meekly and left to find a book.

When Huo Wujiu awoke, it was already well past midnight.

As he slowly opened his eyes, he sensed something resting on his forehead. He snatched the object away from his skin and saw that it was a washcloth drenched in cold water.

He frowned.

Sometime in the afternoon, he had started to run a temperature. That in itself wasn't unusual; he had been injured frequently on the battlefield, and he had occasionally developed fevers from those injuries as well, but he always recovered after getting some sleep.

He dimly recalled that the Prince of Jing had stopped by sometime in the evening. Before Huo Wujiu could figure out what the prince's intentions were, he'd passed out from the fever.

Huo Wujiu lifted his hand again and brushed his forehead.

It was cool to the touch.

Even though he was now alert and clearheaded, he was struck by a rather strong feeling of unreality.

He was a prisoner of war, captured by the enemy nation, and he'd been sent to the Prince of Jing's residence to be used as a means of humiliation. Yet here he was, lying peacefully on a bed, his injuries bandaged cleanly and neatly. There was a cool washcloth on his forehead and a medicinal scent wafting through the air.

It should've smelled bitter, but it only added to the air of steady tranquility.

He was born in a border pass on the frontier. Tough and tenacious, he could withstand almost any hardship or beating. Never in his life had anyone cared for him like this before.

Huo Wujiu looked to the side.

There was a person sitting nearby, surrounded by dusky lamplight.

The Prince of Jing held a book in one hand as it rested against his knees, while the other hand propped up his sagging head. He was already fast asleep. His eyes, usually frosty and contemptuous, were concealed by his exceptionally long eyelashes. One side of his face was bathed in the soft, gentle lamplight.

Huo Wujiu's breath caught ever so slightly in his throat as he came to a distinct, sudden realization.

This person had been watching over him.



Chapter 12

JIANG SUIZHOU DIDN'T SLEEP well that night either.

At some point, he had grown tired enough to fall asleep while reading, at which point Meng Qianshan draped a blanket over him so he wouldn't get a fever.

But when he opened his eyes, he still felt dizzy and lightheaded. The wooden couch was extremely hard, and it was very uncomfortable to sit on for a long period of time. After sleeping on it all night, his body ached all over.

Truthfully, Jiang Suizhou was a little bit peeved at the original prince for this.

Why did he arrange such awful living quarters for Huo Wujiu, with such crudely crafted furniture? Seriously, did he not consider that he might have to “sleep on the couch” here, so to speak?

He straightened up. The sky was beginning to lighten already, and the faint fragrance of food floated into the room. Meng Qianshan was likely instructing the other servants to prepare breakfast.

As Jiang Suizhou stood up, he glanced at the bed.

It was empty.

Where was Huo Wujiu?

Groggy but concerned, he surveyed the room with bleary eyes and soon jolted in alarm when he saw Huo Wujiu sitting next to the window, basking in the early morning sunlight. He seemed to be casually skimming through Jiang Suizhou's partially read book, though Jiang Suizhou could

tell from the way Huo Wujiu was holding it that he definitely wasn't much of a reader.

Huo Wujiu gazed back at him with impassive black eyes, his face mostly devoid of emotion. Jiang Suizhou felt that such eyes could pierce through anyone who crossed him.

A wave of embarrassment suddenly washed over Jiang Suizhou. He hadn't done anything, but he still inexplicably felt a bit guilty. Maybe it was because he had spent the entire night here, watching over Huo Wujiu, a decision that was more or less at odds with his persona.

Nonetheless, he tried to remain cool and nonchalant as he withdrew his gaze and called for his servant.

“Meng Qianshan?”

At the sound of his voice, Meng Qianshan quickly trotted in from outside to help him get ready for the day ahead.

Meng Qianshan had always been talkative, which was a blessing for Jiang Suizhou on this awkward morning. He could prattle on for quite a while regardless of who was listening, as long as Jiang Suizhou didn't interrupt him, so for now he allowed Meng Qianshan to ramble away. Afterward, he pretended that he hadn't seen Huo Wujiu at all and departed after finishing his breakfast.

There was no Grand Assembly today, but he had to report to the ministry office.

Prior to leaving, he made sure to remind Meng Qianshan of his most important duty today.

“Don't forget to move Madam Huo.”

Meng Qianshan assured him that he wouldn't.

Once Jiang Suizhou was gone, Meng Qianshan returned to Huo Wujiu's living quarters and toured the dilapidated compound with several of the other servants. There wasn't really anything to pack up, though, as Huo Wujiu hadn't brought any personal belongings, and he had only stayed here for one night.

However, Madam Huo now had a very different status compared to when he had first joined the household. Wouldn't it be considered a slight if he were delivered to His Highness's living quarters with nothing but his own person?

As such, Meng Qianshan attended to Huo Wujiu throughout breakfast with the utmost care. After Huo Wujiu had eaten his fill, Meng Qianshan was ready to jump in and offer his assistance once more.

"Madam Huo, is there anything you'd like to purchase?" he asked, standing slightly too close and smiling slightly too wide. "If so, I'll send someone to procure the items at once."

Huo Wujiu didn't reply.

He found the eunuch exceptionally noisy and his obsequious behavior also rather irritating. But what disgusted Huo Wujiu the most by far was the way Meng Qianshan fawned over him as though he were a favored concubine.

Meng Qianshan was clueless to all of this, however. At Huo Wujiu's silence, he began to make his own arrangements.

"We'll certainly have to order robes fit for all seasons," he said thoughtfully. "I'll send for a tailor shortly. Oh, and shall I ask a carpenter to

make Madam a new wheelchair as well? And the servants who will be your personal attendants...”

Meng Qianshan trailed off as he realized that Huo Wujiu was staring quite intensely at him. The eunuch promptly leaned down and shuffled forward, thinking that he had a request to make.

“Madam?”

As their eyes met, Meng Qianshan felt cold fear plunge straight through his chest. One look from Huo Wujiu was enough to make one feel as though they’d been dunked into a pool of icy water.

“The only thing I need,” Huo Wujiu said flatly, “is for you to keep your distance from me.”

Meng Qianshan spluttered, his enthusiasm doused completely.

He sheepishly scurried away.

Who would’ve thought that His Highness would develop a preference for the fierce, domineering type?

They were truly too difficult to please.

Even though Jiang Suizhou was supposed to report to the ministry office for duty every day outside of the Grand Assembly, the Ministry of Rites had always been a little more idle than the other departments. Furthermore, Jiang Suizhou’s position in particular had little real responsibility, so he didn’t actually have much to do the entire day.

To top it off, his superior Ji You was a remarkably easygoing people pleaser.

The accounts written about him in the Jing historical records indicated that he was a bureaucratic idler who cared far more for the written word and poetry than politics and scheming. Although he'd been acknowledged as principal graduate by the previous emperor since he'd received the top score in the imperial examination, his career as an official never really took off due to his mild nature and lack of ambition. His poems were strikingly well written, though.

He wasn't overly friendly with Jiang Suizhou, and he clearly wasn't in the same faction, but he also didn't go out of his way to give Jiang Suizhou a hard time. In fact, when he noticed Jiang Suizhou's ashen complexion, he kindly suggested that since there wasn't anything pressing to take care of today, Jiang Suizhou could head back early and get some rest.

However, unbeknownst to Ji You, the ministry office was actually the best place for Jiang Suizhou to relax. He was distressingly out of his depth when it came to both the imperial court and his own harem; he felt he must remain alert and vigilant at all times. It was exhausting.

Unexpectedly, his ministry duties ended up granting him a rare moment of reprieve.

For the first time in his life, Jiang Suizhou found himself empathizing with the modern workaholic office drone. He understood now why so many middle-aged men worked "overtime" smoking in the car, steeling themselves to bear familial pressures before finally going home. With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou put in a hard day's rest in the ministry office.

There was no emperor or Pang Shao; no advisors with burning gazes; nor was there the ticking time bomb that was Huo Wujiu. Even the air in the Ministry of Rites seemed significantly fresher.

The calm atmosphere contributed so greatly to his mood that when it came time to leave for the day, he decided to stop in front of Ji You's desk as he was walking by and exchange some pleasantries.

"Minister Ji, what are you reading?" he asked, eyeing the book in his hand.

Ji You lifted his head. At the sight of Jiang Suizhou, he flipped the book around and handed it to him with a smile.

"Merely a collection of tales told as unofficial history. There's no basis for them. It's just something to pass the time."

Jiang Suizhou took the book and scanned its contents.

Sure enough, it was filled with nonstandard history, tall tales, and many, many artistic liberties. The author might as well have just written a novella about someone who happened to share the same name as the previous emperor.

He flashed a thin smile and returned the book to Ji You.

"It's certainly intriguing," he said cryptically.

"Is Your Highness also interested in this sort of thing?" Ji You asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

The scholars in this day and age tended to be a little self-righteous, and they vastly preferred the orthodox approach to history. Tall tales like these, which might as well be about horses soaring through the sky, were

written to amuse the common people. The nobility and literati typically turned their noses up at such things.

Jiang Suizhou shook his head. Of course he wasn't interested in unofficial history, though Ji You could never guess the reason.

The reason I'm standing here talking to you right now is because I'm being taught a lesson for looking down on unofficial history. I wonder, Minister, what would you think if I told you that you might be living in one of those tall tales?

Obviously, he couldn't voice any of that aloud, so instead he just smiled faintly.

"I wouldn't call it 'interest,' but history has always been written by the people, to be evaluated by later generations. Who knows who is telling the truth, and who is telling a lie?"

When Ji You heard that, his eyes lit up, gleaming with the spark of someone who had found a kindred spirit.

Jiang Suizhou nodded briskly in Ji You's direction. Thinking nothing more of their interaction, he turned and left.

Jiang Suizhou didn't consider himself to be someone worthy of being held in high regard by Minister Ji. After all, he could only bring himself to say such a thing because he had been screwed over by a student and dumped into a version of unofficial history himself.

After leaving the Ministry of Rites, he climbed into the horse-drawn carriage and returned to the Prince of Jing's residence.

Anyin Hall was bustling with activity as people streamed in and out of the courtyard. Just as Jiang Suizhou stepped out of the carriage, Meng Qianshan came out to send off two cloth-carrying tailors. When he spotted his master, he hurried over to greet him.

"Your Highness!" Meng Qianshan exclaimed as he sidled up to him with a grin. "Your servant has already brought Madam Huo over for you, along with a few tailors to outfit Madam in some new clothing. The carpenter will come by tomorrow—your servant noticed that Madam's wheelchair is rather unwieldy and ought to be remade."

Jiang Suizhou gave him a puzzled look. He hadn't even given any specific instructions yet. Why was this guy being so enthusiastic about Huo Wujiu?

Meng Qianshan continued to stare at him with shining puppy dog eyes, eager to be praised.

Jiang Suizhou paused.

"I see. Good work."

Meng Qianshan's face bloomed with such bright, foolish joy that all Jiang Suizhou could do was immediately turn away and head for his room, lest he be blinded by it.

He was in an exceptionally relaxed mood. As he walked, he tugged off his cumbersome cloak. Right before he stepped over the threshold of his room, he suddenly remembered that he'd forgotten to ask what room Huo Wujiu had been given. Before he could double back to inquire with Meng

Qianshan, however, he discovered that the answer to his question was right in front of him.

There he was, surrounded by elegance and grandeur, looking quite out of place.

Jiang Suizhou froze in the middle of shedding his cloak.

Why was Huo Wujiu in his room?

He stood there for a long time, as if nailed to the floor. Then he whipped around and walked back out, nearly colliding with Meng Qianshan. He couldn't help but notice the demure smile on Meng Qianshan's lips and the jubilant glimmer in his eyes. He gave Jiang Suizhou a meaningful look, as if he once again expected to be praised.

Praise you? I'm more inclined to beat you up, Jiang Suizhou thought as he gnashed his teeth.

Meng Qianshan watched him curiously.

"Your Highness?" he prompted cheerily, awaiting his orders.

Jiang Suizhou took a moment to compose himself before responding.

"This was your doing?" he said in a low voice.

At first, Meng Qianshan was a bit confused by this question. Then understanding dawned on him.

"Ah, yes! How silly of your servant," he exclaimed. "It slipped my mind entirely that Madam Huo needs new personal attendants! Your servant expelled the two maids originally assigned to Madam. There's still a porter boy left, but he seems to be fairly well behaved. Your Highness, in your opinion..."

Meng Qianshan trailed off, expecting Jiang Suizhou to jump in with further instructions.

Jiang Suizhou seethed silently.

That's not what I asked! I wanted to know why Huo Wujiu is staying in my room! Are you trying to tell me that none of the other rooms in this massive compound are habitable?!

The words were on the tip of his tongue, but in the end, he couldn't bring himself to say them.

The door to his room was wide open, and Huo Wujiu was right there. He would definitely be able to hear.

If Jiang Suizhou chased him out again after bringing him all the way here, wouldn't that count as another strike against him?

He'd thought that by moving Huo Wujiu closer, he'd be able to play on Easy mode, so to speak. Unfortunately, he'd forgotten to account for Meng Qianshan being a bit of an idiot. Thanks to him, Jiang Suizhou was now locked into Hardcore difficulty instead.

Gritting his teeth, Jiang Suizhou shot Meng Qianshan a vicious glare and swallowed down his complaints.

"There was only one porter to begin with?" he said instead, responding to Meng Qianshan's concerns about the boy. "Where is he? Let me talk to him."

Hearing that, Meng Qianshan quickly led him down the steps to the courtyard where the porter boy was working with several other people to move some heavy items. Sweat beaded across his forehead from the exertion, glistening under the sun.

As Jiang Suizhou walked up to him, the boy hastily set down the item in his hands and bowed.

At that instant, something else occurred to Jiang Suizhou.

From the start, he'd suspected that someone within the court must have assisted the original version of Huo Wujiu for him to be able to escape. The original prince definitely wouldn't have provided him that opportunity, which was why his escape had been delayed for a full three years.

So...what if Jiang Suizhou helped him out by moving him here?

Wouldn't he be doing him a huge favor? That might even mean Jiang Suizhou would only have to contend with Pang Shao and his cronies for one year instead of three! He might have turned this into a win-win situation, actually.

After a moment of contemplation, he decided he needed to speak to the porter boy in private.

"Come with me," he instructed.

The porter boy followed close on his heels, while Meng Qianshan tactfully chose to stay behind.

None of them noticed the dark gaze that traveled through a gap in the window lattice to land on Jiang Suizhou's back.

Huo Wujiu watched as Jiang Suizhou took the boy aside to discuss... something.

What could the Prince of Jing possibly have to say to a porter boy?

It could only be that he had some sort of plan up his sleeve and wanted the boy to do something for him. Perhaps he was ordering him to

keep an eye on Huo Wujiu. Certainly the prince knew as well as he did that the boy couldn't do much else.

Huo Wujiu also knew the reason the Prince of Jing had abruptly decided to move him here to the prince's own living quarters. It was incredibly obvious, in fact.

This was the most heavily guarded place in the entire residence.

The shocked look on the Prince of Jing's face when he entered the room, though, told Huo Wujiu that one of his subordinates must have made a mistake putting him in the main hall specifically. That seemed to be an unexpected turn of events for both of them.

Huo Wujiu prided himself on his composure. Temptation and trivial promises had never affected his rationality, nor was his judgment ever clouded by an iota of momentary goodwill. He was not swayed by any of this, nor did he believe for a second any kindness intended was meaningful or lasting.

He stared quietly out the window, expressionless, observing the man's every move with icy, inscrutable eyes.

Only his hands, resting on the wheelchair, betrayed his indifference. Somewhat restlessly, he tapped his fingertips against the armrests a few times.

Chapter 13

JIANG SUIZHOU ENSURED that no one was nearby before he spoke.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Your humble servant is named Sun Yuan, Your Highness,” said the boy as he hurriedly wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Jiang Suizhou nodded slightly, then gave him some simple instructions—like to serve Huo Wujiu with the utmost care—and emphasized that there was no room for error.

The boy certainly seemed like the obedient, cowardly type. As he listened to Jiang Suizhou speak, he nervously gripped and kneaded the hem of his clothing.

None of his reactions or movements went unnoticed by Jiang Suizhou.

His naivety and docility were quite suitable.

“Since you began attending to Madam Huo yesterday, has anyone requested for you to pass something along to him?” Jiang Suizhou asked the boy.

Sun Yuan jolted. Immediately, panic washed over his face, and he frantically waved his hands.

“N-no!”

That, of course, meant “Yes.”

Although Huo Wujiu was from Northern Liang, his father used to be a general for Southern Jing. There were probably at least a few people in

the court who once had some kind of connection with his father, so it wasn't at all strange that one or two of them might reach out in secret.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

"Even if someone approached you, I will not punish you for it."

"Your Highness," Sun Yuan said, flustered, "while someone did indeed ask for a message to be delivered, your servant declined!"

Jiang Suizhou did his best to seem pleasant and approachable.

"So there was someone," he said mildly.

The gentler His Highness's voice became, the more sinister it sounded, like the ominous calm before the storm. It scared the porter boy witless.

Sun Yuan's legs went weak with terror. He knew there was a reason His Highness had wanted to talk to him out of the blue! How had he guessed the truth, though?

Everyone knew about Madam Huo's true identity. How could Sun Yuan dare to help him correspond with an outsider? At this point, it didn't matter if he had declined the offer or not; he was probably going to be silenced regardless.

"There was... But your servant really didn't..."

"Next time, if someone asks you to deliver another letter," Jiang Suizhou instructed him carefully, "you are to give it to Madam Huo. No need to report back to me."

After all, Huo Wujiu was no fool. If a letter could make its way to him that easily—in Jiang Suizhou's own living quarters, no less—he would be able to deduce that someone had aided the messenger.

“Your servant would never... Huh?”

The boy stared at him, disbelief written across his face. He was absolutely stupefied.

Jiang Suizhou once again adopted his cold, stern persona.

“Just do as you’re told. Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone,” he said. “If even a whisper of this gets out, well, I’m sure you know what the consequences will be.”

With Sun Yuan thoroughly threatened, Jiang Suizhou walked away, hands clasped behind his back.

His room was currently a complete mess, all because of Meng Qianshan’s featherbrained “arrangements.” Jiang Suizhou felt a headache set in just looking at it, and when he remembered that Huo Wujiu was also there, he chose to retreat to the study for a while.

Deciding it best to bypass all that for as long as possible, he calmly ascended the steps and made his way toward the study, detouring through the veranda.

En route, however, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the man he intended to avoid. Amid the constant hustle and bustle, Huo Wujiu was the most incongruous figure in the room.

He sat silently in the corner, alone. He was naturally good-looking, but his gaze was menacing enough to make anyone’s heart skip a beat in fear.

Right now, however, those eyes were lowered, and he was seemingly lost in thought. His long eyelashes concealed the fierce glint in his eyes, giving him an unexpectedly tranquil aura, as though a clear boundary had been drawn to exclude him from the surrounding world.

Jiang Suizhou's footsteps slowed.

At that moment, a maidservant carrying a chest walked past Huo Wujiu. She wasn't paying attention to where she was going, and she accidentally kicked his wheelchair.

Huo Wujiu only swayed slightly, but the maidservant staggered from the collision and nearly dropped the chest. She steadied herself, then rounded on Huo Wujiu in annoyance.

"Why are you so in the way? Can't you sit a little farther away?"

She flicked a disdainful look at Huo Wujiu before moving on.

Jiang Suizhou's brows furrowed.

He couldn't help but veer off the path toward the study. Stepping over the threshold of the main room, he strode inside to confront the maidservant.

"What did you just say?" he asked, frowning.

He didn't even know these people's names, and yet they were so good at causing trouble for him. Here he was, racking his brain to come up with ways to covertly win over Huo Wujiu, and then these people just came along and openly bullied him?

All of the servants in the room were caught off guard, and they glanced fearfully in Jiang Suizhou's direction. He paid the others no attention, only staring frostily at the maidservant.

She jumped at the sight of him, for she immediately knew that he had overheard her snide comments. Not daring to refute him, she dropped to her knees in front of Jiang Suizhou, hugging the chest in her arms.

He gazed down coolly at the maid. “Do you know what you did wrong?”

Bobbing her head repeatedly, the maid said that she knew.

“Who should you be apologizing to?” he pressed.

The maid dropped the chest and shuffled over to Huo Wujiu on her knees before kowtowing to him.

“Your servant behaved discourteously. Madam, I humbly request your forgiveness!”

Huo Wujiu didn’t even look up. He continued sitting there, his entire body turned to the side as though none of this had anything to do with him.

Jiang Suizhou was a little stumped.

He knew that the maidservant ought to be punished for saying such a thing. However, what exactly should that punishment be?

Meng Qianshan wasn’t present at the moment, and Jiang Suizhou had yet to figure out the rules of the residence as far as penalizing servants. Perhaps a pay deduction was appropriate? But he didn’t know how much of her pay to deduct. Other common punishments would be lashing or prolonged kneeling, but Jiang Suizhou, with his modern sensibilities, couldn’t bring himself to issue a physical sentence.

After thinking it over for a bit, he failed to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

“Go find Meng Qianshan to receive your punishment,” he said limply.

The maid hastily bowed to him and responded that she would.

Jiang Suizhou assumed that his reprimands had been effective, considering that all the other servants had fallen silent, too scared to even move. At the very least, all the people in his living quarters would think twice about bullying Huo Wujiu again.

Relieved, he began to leave.

He did what needed to be done. Now, he was going to head to the study and enjoy a lovely few hours away from Huo Wujiu and at least a handful of his other problems.

A disgruntled look flashed across the kneeling maid’s face after he turned away.

She went by the name Taozhi. Until now, she’d been one of His Highness’s most highly regarded servants, just below Meng Qianshan. If he wasn’t attending to His Highness, then she was.

She never imagined that one day, her master would berate her so ruthlessly because of some invalid. And in front of everyone, no less!

However, even though her master had chastised her, he hadn’t personally punished her, despite the severity of her mistake. That must have been a sign of her master’s compassion for her, surely. He was just giving her some pointers because he happened to overhear what she said, that was all. Still, the opprobrium stung.

She raised her head and glared at Huo Wujiu; everything was entirely his fault.

Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou had completely failed to notice the ice frosting over Huo Wujiu's gaze, concealed beneath his long eyelashes.

As Jiang Suizhou exited the room, Huo Wujiu lifted his gaze from his spot in the corner and swept a glacial look in the direction of the prince's back.

The Prince of Jing was acting rather ridiculous. He had already assigned someone to monitor him, anyway. What was the point? He should just own up to his actions.

He watched over him for an entire night, all for the sake of this charade which he refused to drop. Why bother putting on a show of defending him at this point?

There was no need for that.

In the blink of an eye, night had fallen, and it was time for the evening meal.

His Highness had dismissed all of the other servants from the study, including Qianshan-gonggong. But that wasn't unusual, given His Highness's extreme aversion to being interrupted while concentrating on something.

Since there was now another master in the hall, the kitchen began to prepare dinner, one dish at a time, even though His Highness had yet to emerge from the study. It wasn't long, though, before someone delivered a message to the main hall on rather short notice.

“Two officials have invited His Highness to dine with them, so His Highness will not be eating here tonight,” the servant reported.

Meng Qianshan was currently waiting attentively outside the study, which left Taozhi in charge of the main hall. As the other maids looked to her, she slowly surveyed her surroundings before eventually focusing on Huo Wujiu, her eyes filled with scorn.

He was sitting next to the window, reading a book.

“What are you all standing around for? Prepare the table for dinner,” she said shortly. “Do you mean to starve the mistress in our hall just because His Highness is not dining here tonight?”

None of the other servants dared to aggravate her, and they instantly busied themselves with their various tasks.

Sun Yuan, who was standing near Huo Wujiu, also stepped forward to attend to him. Without saying a word, Huo Wujiu set his book aside.

Only he knew how much he disliked reading.

He had always felt annoyed at the mere sight of those dizzying lines of characters, even as a child. If he wasn't skipping lessons to ride horses in the military encampment, he was devising new pranks to pull on his tutor. By the time he was about seven or eight, he had already infuriated two tutors to the point of resignation. It was hard enough to find teachers for him due to Yangguan's remoteness, and his father was so angry that he chased after him with a horsewhip, threatening to beat him.

Even now, reading gave him a bit of a headache. But ironically enough, he couldn't do much of anything else these days.

Huo Wujiu glanced back down at the book idly, but once Sun Yuan saw that Huo Wujiu had set it down, he started pushing the wheelchair

toward the table.

There were already a few dishes laid out, and after Taozhi had snapped at the other servants, they quickly brought out the rest of it, one piping hot plate after another. Since the meal had initially been prepared with Jiang Suizhou in mind, the dishes were plentiful and exquisitely assembled. Wisps of steam curled slowly and enticingly into the air under the bright lamplight.

Taozhi stood and watched nearby, her expression cold as frost.

She was naturally beautiful. When she first came to the prince's residence, even the selling agent said that if she was blessed with good fortune, perhaps she could go from being a lowly attendant to a concubine.

With that in mind, she clawed her way up to her current position, determined to shed her status as a slave girl and become a mistress...but as it turned out, her master only liked men.

What was so good about men, anyway? It was one thing to be drawn to Madam Gu's type, she supposed, but why was this wheelchair-bound wretch trying to squeeze into her master's household? Though he sat tall and was well-built, he was also dull and useless.

Because of the embarrassment she had suffered earlier that afternoon, Taozhi stewed silently in her resentment. Her irritation toward Huo Wujiu grew greater and greater.

So what if he's handsome? So what if he's a general? Look at him now—he's been crippled and given to serve another man, Taozhi thought viciously.

At that moment, a servant girl walked in with a bowl of soup. As she stepped over the door threshold, she tripped and narrowly avoided spilling

the liquid.

Well, His Highness wasn't here tonight, anyway.

Taozhi stalked over to the girl and snatched the soup from her.

"Why are you being so careless?" she snarled.

She leveled an intimidating glare at the girl, who apologized profusely. Taozhi just turned around with the dish and carried it to the table herself.

A second later, she very intentionally bumped into the table. The bowl flipped dramatically out of her hands, and the scalding hot soup splashed all over Huo Wujiu's legs.

Chapter 14

STEAM BILLOWED INTO THE AIR as the entire bowl of soup immediately spilled across Huo Wujiu's lap, soaking into the fabric of his robes and splattering down onto the floor.

Immediately, the nearby maidservants cried out in alarm. Sun Yuan leaped forward in a panic to snatch up a cloth napkin and try to wipe up the mess.

Huo Wujiu remained motionless next to the table. He merely looked down at his legs.

Even through a layer of clothing, the blistering hot soup still hurt. But that sort of pain didn't mean much to him, especially now.

He'd been forced to sit and watch the girl purposefully splash the soup over him. To anyone who had practiced martial arts, her movements were extraordinarily slow and clumsy. And yet...he wasn't able to avoid it.

All because he couldn't move his legs.

That kind of indignity was more difficult to bear than any physical pain.

A moment later, Huo Wujiu looked up again and gazed coolly at Taozhi.

If she had been a man, he would've repaid her action with a hundredfold vengeance by pouring all of that searing soup straight down her throat.

However, he would never raise a hand against a woman.

Nonetheless, that venomous look was enough to send a shiver of fear running down Taozhi's spine, and she involuntarily took a step back.

Then she came to her senses.

What was she doing? She was frightened of this incapacitated dullard giving her a mean look? What did she have to be afraid of?

His Highness wasn't going to be here tonight, anyway. Currently, she was the only one in the hall with any authority. The other servants wouldn't have the guts to gossip about her to His Highness, and there was no way the pathetic man in front of her would be shameless enough to rat her out either.

"Forgive your servant's careless accident," Taozhi said with a sneer, her eyes narrowing. "Alas, if only Mistress had moved out of the way, perhaps it wouldn't have scalded you."

Following that, she turned her attention to Sun Yuan, standing behind Huo Wujiu.

"And you there! Why are you so slow-witted? You have one job—to push Mistress's wheelchair—and you can't even do that? If you're going to just stand there like a pole, you might as well sweep the courtyard tomorrow instead!"

Taozhi had grown accustomed to abusing her power and lording over the other servants in the hall. His Highness was seldom in Anyin Hall, with Meng Qianshan accompanying him wherever he went. As third in hierarchy, Taozhi generally had free rein here.

Normally, she scolded and berated the surrounding servants whenever she pleased. Once she was done, some of the braver ones would even come up to placate her and smooth the situation over.

Now, though, as she finished her tirade of abuse, the room fell so quiet that she could've heard a pin drop.

Breathing heavily, she frowned and looked around her.

All of the other maids in the room had lowered their heads, like a flock of timid quails.

Taozhi sized them up, her eyebrows furrowed in displeasure and confusion.

Were they so frightened of a mistress who couldn't even walk? What was there to be scared of?

She whirled around with a disdainful snort, intending to leave the room. However, before she could take a step, she became aware of the two figures standing in the doorway.

"Your... Your Highness!"

Taozhi's legs gave out, and she dropped to her knees at once.

Jiang Suizhou stayed in the study until twilight closed in around him.

Earlier, he had received an invitation from two Ministry of Works officials, asking if he'd like to share a drink with them later that evening. Considering he had only arrived here a few days ago, he didn't know how well this body tolerated alcohol yet. After thinking it over, he ultimately decided against attending the dinner.

After a brief delay, Jiang Suizhou had Meng Qianshan personally deliver the invitation back to the officials, along with a polite excuse that he

had caught a cold after not resting well the night before and was spending the day recuperating in his residence.

Fortunately, since he was notoriously in poor health, the two officials accepted his excuse without question and didn't insist on his attendance.

Once this matter was resolved, Jiang Suizhou left the study. After all, he couldn't skip dinner just because he happened to be housing an injured but ferocious tiger.

And so it happened that Jiang Suizhou approached the entrance of the main hall just as Taozhi began to shower Huo Wujiu and the servants with verbal abuse.

The maid stood in front of the table with her hands planted on her hips, completely blocking his view of Huo Wujiu. Her shrill voice made its way over to him long before he reached the doorway.

Meng Qianshan's expression changed at the sight of her, but as he was about to speak, Jiang Suizhou lifted a hand and stopped him.

While he couldn't see the girl's face from this angle, he could tell from her clothing and accessories that it was the same maid who ran into Huo Wujiu earlier today as she was moving a chest. Jiang Suizhou had assumed that she wouldn't dare to behave this way after he'd reprimanded her. He hadn't expected her to be so unbridled.

For a moment, Jiang Suizhou wondered if she had some sort of death wish. Perhaps she thought that her own life was too long, or maybe just his.

He watched quietly as she lashed out, all fire and venom, until finally she noticed him standing there and sank to her knees, folding in fear.

Jiang Suizhou was left a bit speechless by her complete and immediate shift in attitude. A second ago, she had acted so high-and-

mighty, and now she trembled pitifully on the floor.

What's the point of being scared now? Why didn't you know to be afraid when you were mistreating Huo Wujiu?

As a person born a thousand years into the future, Jiang Suizhou was aware he couldn't help viewing these situations through a modern lens. He thought of himself as someone who tried to treat all living creatures with the dignity and respect that they deserved. However, he'd met people just like Taozhi in his previous life as well. There were always some people who felt the need to trample over other people's dignity to make themselves feel better, unable to even return any respect they were shown.

Even though she herself was under a slave contract, when she was granted the smallest measure of authority, she promptly used it to brutalize others.

When Jiang Suizhou stayed silent and stony-faced, Meng Qianshan hastily took a step forward.

"Taozhi, what an imposing young lady you are!" he barked. "Why, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were the mistress yourself! Have you forgotten that Madam Huo is your master here?"

Quivering, Taozhi kowtowed again and again as she rushed to make excuses for herself.

"Your Highness, your servant did no such thing! It...it was the boy tasked with pushing Madam's wheelchair! He bumped the wheelchair into your servant, which is why your servant accidentally spilled the soup onto Madam..."

"Do you think I'm blind?" Jiang Suizhou interrupted her, frowning.

Taozhi trembled in terror and squashed her forehead against the floor as she prostrated herself.

“Meng Qianshan,” Jiang Suizhou said tonelessly, looking away from the maid.

Meng Qianshan understood at once.

“Why is she still here, sullyng His Highness’s mood with her presence? Take her away!” he ordered.

Almost immediately, two manservants came to drag Taozhi away.

Jiang Suizhou had full faith that Meng Qianshan would handle it for him. He massaged the space between his eyebrows before he walked over to Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu’s robe was drenched and clung to his legs, and steam was still rising faintly from the bowl lying nearby.

It was already incredibly humiliating to be splashed with soup. To add insult to injury, the maid had intentionally targeted Huo Wujiu’s legs, as though she was trying to rub salt into his wounds.

For some reason, Jiang Suizhou’s chest ached a little when he saw Huo Wujiu sitting in the wheelchair, completely silent.

Jiang Suizhou tore his gaze away with some effort.

He definitely had to do something, considering the unfair treatment Huo Wujiu had been subjected to. But as a haughty, coldhearted prince, he couldn’t just apologize to Huo Wujiu as he pleased.

Jiang Suizhou’s head throbbed.

“Take Madam to the back to change into fresh robes first,” he said.

He needed some time to organize his thoughts.

Sun Yuan quickly obeyed and pushed the wheelchair behind the folding screen in the inner room.

Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou sat down and rubbed his temples. He was about to try and get some thinking done when Sun Yuan, who had just vanished behind the screen, suddenly shuffled back out alone.

“What is it?” Jiang Suizhou asked, looking up from the table.

Sun Yuan’s hands were empty, and he seemed a little bewildered standing next to the screen.

“Madam said that your servant wasn’t needed.”

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but glance at the folding screen, where he could just make out a sitting silhouette.

He hesitated for a moment before he made a noise of acknowledgment and didn’t comment further.

He wasn’t sure why, but he found himself unusually in tune with Huo Wujiu’s current frame of mind. Perhaps it was because he had studied history for nearly a decade, and in fact, he had written several papers analyzing Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou knew better than most that Huo Wujiu didn’t need anyone.

Injured and disabled as he was, he didn’t require another to take care of him as though he were helpless. He was a falcon born in the sandstorms of Yangguan, hardy and tenacious, not to mention especially independent and proud.

It wasn’t easy to kill him, but it was even harder to lock him in a cage and force him to be lavished with expensive clothes and fine cuisine. That

wasn't what he wanted or needed, anyway. So how could Jiang Suizhou go about earning his favor without risking dozing on him?

Deep in thought, Jiang Suizhou was supposed to be contemplating the countermeasures and phrasing that he was going to use, but his train of thought had derailed considerably, beyond his control.

All was quiet in the room. The only noise came from behind the folding screen—the indistinct rustling of fabric, the creak of the wheelchair rocking slightly. Soon, Huo Wujiu rolled himself out from behind the screen, having changed into clean robes.

Sun Yuan hurried forward to push the wheelchair for him.

Huo Wujiu didn't have any clothes he could change into yet, and none of the other concubines in the residence shared his tall, broad-shouldered build. For the time being, he had changed into the coarsely woven short robe and pants typically worn by the male servants.

Jiang Suizhou gazed in his direction.

Given how handsome Huo Wujiu was, he looked like a model in anything and everything. Even though he was wearing simple, somewhat crude gray garments, he seemed to have the dashing air of a general caught in the midst of urgent military duties.

Sun Yuan nimbly pushed Huo Wujiu's wheelchair back over to the table. As Jiang Suizhou picked up his chopsticks, he sneaked a look at Huo Wujiu.

He couldn't help but wonder about the wounds on Huo Wujiu's calves. They hadn't been in the immediate splash zone, but there was still a high chance that they had been splattered by the hot soup. Then again, maybe not? Huo Wujiu's taciturn, unbothered behavior indicated otherwise.

Naturally, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to impulsively summon a doctor for this. However, he knew that Huo Wujiu was remarkably good at enduring pain. Jiang Suizhou couldn't confidently say whether he had or hadn't been burned.

With that thought in mind, he cast a few more worried glances at Huo Wujiu.

At that moment, Huo Wujiu lifted his eyes and looked straight at him, catching him directly in the middle of a furtive look.

Jiang Suizhou made a transparent attempt to look away when he realized that Huo Wujiu was gazing at him with a calm, placid expression, seemingly waiting for him to speak.

Caught red-handed, unable to escape, he cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Did the bandages get wet?" Jiang Suizhou asked, casually picking up a bite of food with his chopsticks.

"No," answered Huo Wujiu.

His voice was quite pleasant in a low and deep way, diffusing into the darkness of the night like rich, mellow liquor.

Jiang Suizhou hummed a neutral "mmm" in response.

"That maid was acting above her station. She won't appear here again," he said.

Huo Wujiu remained silent.

Jiang Suizhou wasn't expecting him to reply in the first place. Instead, he raised his head and glanced at Meng Qianshan, who nodded swiftly and gave a shallow bow.

“Rest assured, Master! This will not happen again!”

Jiang Suizhou didn't say anything else. He just made another little sound of acknowledgment and resumed eating.

Maybe I can act a little remorseful because of what happened today, and from there, slowly transform my attitude toward him, he thought to himself.

At least now he knew he truly didn't need to worry about the other servants in the hall. Nobody would dare to slight Huo Wujiu again after today's events, that was for sure.

Although he was well aware that Huo Wujiu didn't require this kind of care or attention, Jiang Suizhou needed to seize this opportunity to prove himself an ally and make his intentions clear. At the very least, he had to show Huo Wujiu that he did not intend to actively harm him, even if he didn't like him.

They finished eating in silence.

Once the meal concluded, the maidservants cleared the dishes and cups from the table before heading to the bedroom to make evening preparations.

They had to ensure that everything was arranged and in order, from the books that His Highness was going to read at night to the bed that the masters were going to sleep on.

Jiang Suizhou sat to the side with a book in his hand, staring blankly as Meng Qianshan led the other servants into the bedroom.

His eyes were somewhat unfocused.

At that moment, he realized that that blissful time spent alone in the study had been *too* peaceful, to the point that he had inadvertently let a critical issue slip from his mind.

Jiang Suizhou's gaze landed on Huo Wujiu, who was sitting nearby, before he looked gravely down at the book in his hands.

...If Huo Wujiu slept in his bedroom, where was he going to sleep?

Chapter 15

AFTER THE SERVANTS prepared the bedroom for the evening and helped Jiang Suizhou bathe and change into his sleepwear, Jiang Suizhou dismissed them all from the room.

“No need to wait here,” Jiang Suizhou instructed indifferently, lounging on the daybed with a book in one hand. “I’ll read for a while, then retire for the night.”

At that, Meng Qianshan looked at Jiang Suizhou, who appeared aloof and haughty, before glancing at the chamber in the back.

It was where Madam Huo was currently bathing and getting ready for the evening alone.

With a knowing look in his eyes, Meng Qianshan dipped his head and withdrew from the room with the other servants. On his way out, he considerately pulled the door shut for Jiang Suizhou.

The sizable room became very quiet, save for the sound of water coming from the rear chamber.

Everyone else had departed.

Jiang Suizhou exhaled deeply as his entire body relaxed. Tossing aside the book, he slumped onto the daybed.

How miserable. When he first transmigrated here, he’d thought that he would only have to sleep on a daybed for one night, but now he wondered if he’d get the chance to sleep on a real bed ever again.

He began plotting in his head. This just meant that he had to improve Huo Wujiu’s trust in him as quickly as possible, so he could look for an

opportunity to kick him out of his room sooner rather than later. Once they were on agreeable terms, he wouldn't have to worry as much about asking for space.

However, right now, there was nothing he could do. He was destined to sleep on the daybed for a while longer; that much was unavoidable.

Jiang Suizhou collapsed across the daybed with a sigh. All that burning enthusiasm for his bed-reclaiming machinations had been extinguished. Then, resigning himself to his fate, Jiang Suizhou picked up the book and sat upright once more.

He tried to distract himself by reading, but he couldn't absorb anything. After staring at the same few lines for a minute, he couldn't help but lower his head and pat the cushion of the daybed underneath him.

Hm... Well, at least the daybed in his own room felt decently comfortable, compared to the first one.

With that newfound observation, he braced a hand against the cushion and peered behind him.

The daybed was quite wide, and it appeared to be around five feet long—not as good as a proper bed, but certainly not a bad option for catnaps during the day. Several round pillows were piled against the backrest, but he wasn't sure if they would be suitably soft, considering how firm they looked.

Jiang Suizhou leaned over and grabbed one of the pillows to knead between his fingers.

Surprisingly, it was actually pretty plush.

Growing up, Jiang Suizhou never had to worry about basic necessities such as clothing or food. He never could've expected that

simply having a daybed large enough to sleep on or a pillow comfortable enough to rest on would one day bring him such joy.

It might've been because he hadn't slept well during either of the two previous nights, but the mere thought of a daybed had automatically triggered his body's stress.

The pillow was exceptionally soft under his fingertips. Jiang Suizhou's lips subconsciously curled up in a small smile as he squished the cushioning a few more times.

All of a sudden, Jiang Suizhou's moment of joy was interrupted by a creaking sound. He jolted in surprise and whipped his head around.

Huo Wujiu had emerged from the rear chamber at some point. He was currently sitting in the doorway, quietly watching Jiang Suizhou with his dark eyes.

The sound had come from his wheelchair.

Jiang Suizhou cast aside the pillow.

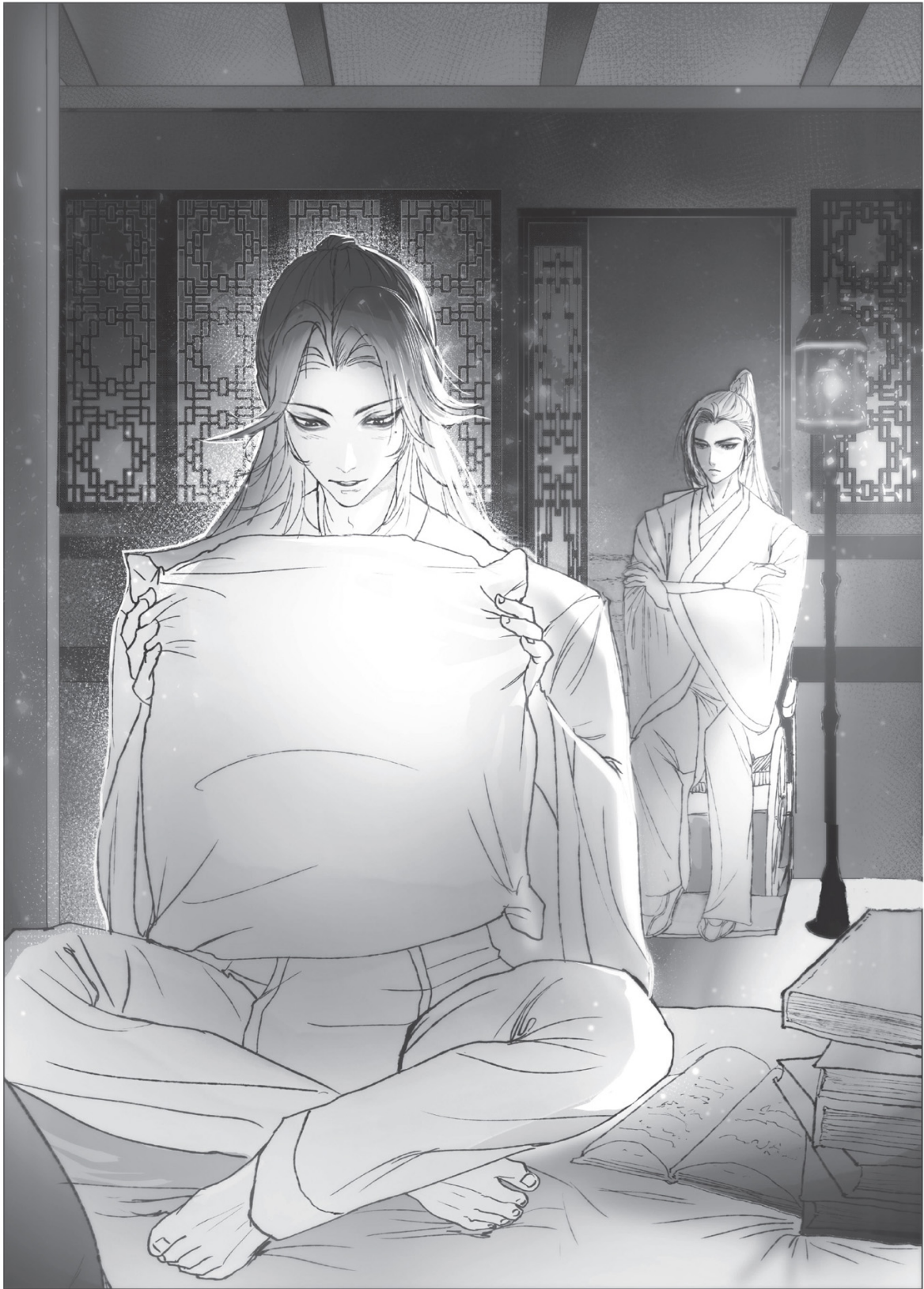
He had relaxed a little too much just now. For a moment, he'd actually forgotten that there was still another person in the room! How long had Huo Wujiu been watching him?

Jiang Suizhou hastily sat up, still clutching the book in one hand. But his attempts at playing it off were futile: Behind him, the neatly stacked pile of pillows now sat in disarray due to the way he'd pulled one of them out. The evidence against him was overwhelming and obvious.

Jiang Suizhou was so mortified that his scalp started to prickle.

Fortunately, Huo Wujiu still displayed no interest in him whatsoever.

Huo Wujiu's eyes didn't linger on him for very long. As if he didn't care in the slightest what Jiang Suizhou was doing, Huo Wujiu merely shot him a fleeting, unreadable look before he turned his gaze away and rolled himself into the bedroom.



In this case, Jiang Suizhou had to feel grateful for Huo Wujiu's frustratingly detached, standoffish attitude.

Clearing his throat, he propped his hand in front of his forehead, conveniently hiding his own eyes from view, and acted as though nothing had happened.

"You take the bed," he instructed as he stared unwaveringly at his book.

He didn't lift his head again.

Jiang Suizhou buried his face in the book, but his focus was elsewhere. He had funneled all of his attention to his ears, so he could closely follow Huo Wujiu's every movement without having to look at him.

He heard Huo Wujiu propel himself over to the bed, then slowly shift onto it from the wheelchair. After he quietly lay down, no more sounds came from his direction.

Jiang Suizhou let out a sigh of relief.

As long as Huo Wujiu doesn't bring it up, what is there for me to be embarrassed about? I'm not embarrassed.

It was this mantra he chanted to himself repeatedly, but his brainwashing wasn't very successful. For the next hour, he couldn't really process what he was reading, and he kept replaying the earlier incident in his head.

Huo Wujiu probably didn't see him squishing the pillow like an idiot. The noise that initially alerted Jiang Suizhou was the sound of the wheelchair moving, which meant that Huo Wujiu had just come out of the room at the time. He might not have seen what Jiang Suizhou was doing at all. In fact, he almost certainly didn't...unless...well, maybe he did?

As a war raged inside his mind, Jiang Suizhou nearly burned a hole through the book with the intensity of his stare. He completely missed the brief look that Huo Wujiu flicked in his direction once he lay down on the bed.

His lowered head, the way he was firmly concealing his face with his hand, his vexation and shame—not a single detail escaped Huo Wujiu's notice.

A rabbit draped in a fox's pelt had accidentally exposed its short little tail.

The corner of Huo Wujiu's mouth twitched.

This unspoken standoff lasted late into the night.

Huo Wujiu didn't stir again after lying down. Jiang Suizhou extinguished the lamps on his own before he tugged a blanket over himself and fell asleep on the daybed.

Sure enough, once he fell asleep, he slept extraordinarily well that night.

The daybed wasn't actually that comfortable, but it was good enough for Jiang Suizhou's exhausted body. After getting barely any sleep for two nights in a row, just being awake had taken almost every drop of energy he had. As a result, he passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow, and he didn't even have any dreams.

He slept until the sky gradually brightened outside, and someone entered the room to gingerly pat him awake. The moment he opened his eyes, he was greeted by the sight of Meng Qianshan staring at him in shock, outlined by the hazy light of dawn.

Jiang Suizhou sat up, immediately startled into alertness.

Meng Qianshan stood in front of him, hunched forward in a bow, an envelope in one hand. Astonishment was written all over his face. He first looked at the bed, then at Jiang Suizhou.

“Master,” he said hesitantly, “why are you sleeping on the...”

Gritting his teeth, Jiang Suizhou kept his voice down as he interrupted him.

“What is it?”

Meng Qianshan was a fine servant, and Jiang Suizhou really did appreciate him, but he was just a little slow on the uptake.

Seriously, who would ask their master “*Why are you sleeping on the daybed?*” when they came across their master sleeping on said daybed? Have a little tact!

Meng Qianshan blinked a few times in silent confusion.

“Last night, the...” Meng Qianshan began to say as he proffered the letter.

Jiang Suizhou raised his hand, gesturing for Meng Qianshan to stop talking, having spotted Huo Wujiu still lying in bed.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, and it was still far too early to get up. Huo Wujiu appeared to be sound asleep. If they conversed here, they would most likely wake him up.

Following Jiang Suizhou's line of sight, Meng Qianshan instantly understood what he was thinking.

"Let's talk outside," Jiang Suizhou whispered, standing up.

Meng Qianshan followed quickly and quietly on his heels.

They only resumed their discussion once they left the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

"What happened?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

Meng Qianshan held the letter out to Jiang Suizhou once again.

"Your Highness, the two officials who invited you to dinner last night had this delivered on the sly this morning, before the sun had even risen. According to the messenger, they intended to give it to you yesterday in person, but since you weren't feeling well, they sent it over early today instead."

Jiang Suizhou took the letter from him.

He had a general grasp of the situation. The two people who invited him for drinks yesterday were minor officials from the Ministry of Works, which meant that the information they wanted to pass along to him was likely related to the ancestral temple commission.

He tucked the letter into his robe and nodded. Then he turned to leave.

Right at that moment, Meng Qianshan unexpectedly took a step forward and blocked his path.

Jiang Suizhou glanced at him with a frown, only to see a look of righteous indignation spread over Meng Qianshan's face.

"How could Madam Huo make you sleep on the daybed?!"

Jiang Suizhou was a little speechless.

You're still asking? I already cut you off earlier so you wouldn't talk about it anymore, yet you're still asking?! Just take the hint already!

"Is this any of your business?" he replied, monotone, then turned on his heel to return to the bedroom.

But Meng Qianshan remained dauntless, even in the face of imminent danger.

"While it should not be, Your Highness is in poor health! Your servant cannot allow him to treat you so unfairly!"

Jiang Suizhou could hear the quaver in Meng Qianshan's voice. His fear was evident.

"Is Madam Huo using his superior mastery over martial arts to push you around?" Meng Qianshan continued stubbornly, his voice low. "Don't fear, Your Highness. This isn't Northern Liang; he won't get away with such..."

Jiang Suizhou helplessly lifted a hand and stopped Meng Qianshan from continuing.

He knew that Meng Qianshan's loyalty was unwavering and genuine, but that also meant that he had quite the one-track mind.

"Enough with the nonsensical guesses," Jiang Suizhou said coldly. "Focus on your own tasks."

He circled around Meng Qianshan and pushed open the bedroom door, but Meng Qianshan spoke again from behind him, his voice aggrieved but puzzled.

“But...Your Highness is even sleeping on the daybed! Why did you want to bring this person to your living quarters in the first place?”

At this, Jiang Suizhou realized that if he didn't justify his choices, Meng Qianshan wasn't going to let this go. He took a deep breath before he closed the door again and turned back around.

“I chose to sleep there,” he said.

Meng Qianshan looked astounded.

“He may be a concubine,” Jiang Suizhou said stiffly, “but I am deeply fond of him, and I don't wish to treat him with disrespect. Do you understand now?”

He kept his expression cold even as he watched Meng Qianshan's eyes grow so wide that it seemed his eyeballs were about to fall out of his head.

“Your Highness, you—! But you...but you just met him for the first time a few days ago!”

Now he was digging for even more details?

Jiang Suizhou wanted to deceive this unthinking dunce as fast as he could, so he began to throw out whatever nonsense came to mind first.

“How do you know that was the first time? In truth, I saw him years ago, when the Marquis of Dingbei returned to the capital,” he rambled, carried by the currents of his stream of consciousness. “That was when I first developed feelings for him. Time passed, and though I never saw him in person again, I heard much about him over the years.”

Meng Qianshan gaped at him, slack-jawed.

Hook, line, and sinker. Seeing the evidence of his success, Jiang Suizhou put an end to the topic with a warning.

“No one else knows about this, nor have I ever divulged even a hint of this to Madam Huo. Now you know the truth, but you must keep it to yourself. Is that clear?”

By that point, Meng Qianshan was so dumbstruck that he had stopped blinking entirely; all he could do was nod dumbly.

Jiang Suizhou glanced at him impassively before he opened the door once more and returned to the bedroom.

It was still early in the morning. Rather than dawdling out there with Meng Qianshan, he'd be better off hurrying back to his bed and catching up on another hour of sleep.

With that in mind, he tiptoed back over to the daybed. Before lying down, he made a point to check on Huo Wujiu.

He was still motionless; their conversation hadn't woken him up.

Reassured, Jiang Suizhou lay down in the daybed again. He had no idea that the moment that his eyes fell shut, Huo Wujiu's slowly opened.

Huo Wujiu was frozen in astonishment, his brows furrowed tightly together. He gazed out at the dark room with a strange, complicated expression. His eyes landed on Jiang Suizhou's back and lingered there for a long moment.

What Jiang Suizhou didn't know was that Huo Wujiu was, in fact, a light sleeper. No matter how fast asleep he was, the slightest sound was enough to instantly wake him and put him on high alert—a result of many years in the army.

Additionally, Huo Wujiu had exceedingly sharp ears. Even muffled through a door, even spoken in hushed voices, he had still heard what was said, clearly and distinctly.

Every single word.

Chapter 16

THE SUN CLIMBED into the sky.

At first, Jiang Suizhou wanted to get some more rest, but because he had rested too well the night before, he unexpectedly couldn't fall asleep again after lying back down. He decided to get up early instead, and Meng Qianshan prepared breakfast earlier to accommodate.

Huo Wujiu also rose very early.

Even though they were sharing a bedroom, there was almost no communication between them. After Meng Qianshan finished helping Jiang Suizhou wash up, Huo Wujiu went by himself to the rear chamber to do the same. Once he had propelled himself back to the bedroom, Sun Yuan took over and guided him to the dining area.

The table was already covered in a spread of dishes. Jiang Suizhou was sitting at the table, leisurely reading a book.

He didn't feel too strongly about waiting for Huo Wujiu so they could eat together, but the dining etiquette he had been taught as a child told him that he should wait until everyone was present before beginning to eat.

Seeing that Huo Wujiu had arrived, Jiang Suizhou set down the book and picked up his chopsticks.

Even sitting across from each other and sharing a meal together, neither of them spoke.

But today, for some reason, Jiang Suizhou kept getting the feeling that something was a little off.

He had the distinct impression that Huo Wujiu kept looking over at him repeatedly, but Jiang Suizhou couldn't catch him in the act. Every time Jiang Suizhou glanced over, Huo Wujiu's eyes were downcast, and he was merely eating. He didn't even spare him a single look.

It was quite odd.

Meanwhile, Meng Qianshan had noticed from his position nearby that his master had been sneaking looks at Madam Huo all morning. He simply assumed that his master was having a hard time controlling his feelings in front of his beloved.

At a time like this, as a good subordinate, his master's concerns were naturally his own concerns.

As such, Meng Qianshan piped up with a cheery smile.

"Master, the carpenter came by yesterday. Since your servant remembered you specifically mentioning how awfully cumbersome Madam's wheelchair is, your servant told him to make haste with the order. In fact, the carpenter just sent a message saying that he would be able to deliver the new wheelchair to our courtyard before the end of the day."

Jiang Suizhou lifted his head just in time to see Meng Qianshan wink aggressively at him.

He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Meng Qianshan's intent was to indirectly showcase his master's kindness and benevolence to Huo Wujiu.

He was somewhat dumbfounded. But really, this was just a different path to the same destination. He decided to think of it as Meng Qianshan trying to help him get on Huo Wujiu's good side.

“Good, good,” Jiang Suizhou said mildly, accepting the help. “If it arrives early, you should push it around the courtyard a little to see if it’s easy to use.”

It was perfect timing. Meng Qianshan had nobody else to blabber to while Jiang Suizhou was at work in the Ministry of Rites, so he might as well help Jiang Suizhou out by pushing Huo Wujiu outside to get some fresh air.

Beaming, Meng Qianshan readily agreed.

“If Your Highness comes back early, you two can even go out for a walk together!” he said.

...Now that was going a little overboard.

Jiang Suizhou cast him a look of warning.

Meng Qianshan quickly shut his mouth, still grinning.

As Jiang Suizhou lightly withdrew his gaze, he abruptly locked eyes with Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu was looking directly at him, brow furrowed. His eyes were still rather cold, but there was now a trace of something complicated in them that Jiang Suizhou couldn’t understand.

Startled, Jiang Suizhou watched as Huo Wujiu pointedly looked away from him again.

Jiang Suizhou was a bit baffled.

Had he...had he said something to aggravate him just now?

*

Jiang Suizhou didn’t feel like figuring out what was off about Huo Wujiu. Once he was done eating, he headed to the Ministry of Rites to loaf

around.

Meng Qianshan stayed behind in his stead. Extremely diligent and attentive, he hovered near Huo Wujiu, making it clear he was at his beck and call.

Huo Wujiu watched indifferently as Meng Qianshan bustled around him. The eunuch only gave Huo Wujiu a much-desired respite—albeit a temporary one—when the carpenter arrived to deliver the wheelchair.

He massaged his temples. The eunuch was so damn noisy.

At that moment, Sun Yuan—who had been standing behind him the entire time—took the opportunity to step forward and stuff something into his hand.

Huo Wujiu looked up at him. Sun Yuan was stiff as a board from head to toe, and his nervousness was written plainly across his face.

“This is... Er, someone requested that your humble servant give this to you,” Sun Yuan stammered in a whisper.

The porter boy had never done something like this before. It was something of a tall order for him.

The day before yesterday, as he was exiting the residence alone after wheeling Madam Huo into the courtyard, someone stopped him. The stranger pressed a silver ingot into his hand before asking him to pass a letter along to Madam Huo.

What kind of person was His Highness, and who was Madam Huo? Just thinking about the answers to those two questions, he hastily declined and ran away. Fortunately, the person who made the request wasn't cruel enough to press him into service despite his hesitancy, nor did he kill him to ensure his silence.

But then, a day later, His Highness instructed him to privately deliver all letters and items to Madam Huo as requested. That had terrified Sun Yuan down to his marrow. However, he didn't have the guts to disobey a direct order from His Highness.

That night, on his way back home from the Prince of Jing's residence, he encountered the same person again.

"Consider this my plea to you: All you have to do is deliver this letter to him," the man said. "General Huo isn't a careless man. So long as the letter makes it to him, he will not leave behind any traces that might implicate you."

Sun Yuan faltered.

Well, since His Highness had instructed him to accept...

Hope immediately flickered across the man's face at the sight of Sun Yuan's hesitation.

"What do you say? I can pay even more, if you want. That's very negotiable!"

Sun Yuan had been honest and sincere his entire life. That offer scared him so much that even his thoughts stumbled over themselves.

It wasn't exactly about the money...but at the same time, he couldn't just say that His Highness had actually told him to do this... So, what now?

After stalling for a second, Sun Yuan spoke.

"Um... Y-yeah, increase the pay."

"By how much?" the man replied quickly.

Sun Yuan paused before bashfully extending two fingers.

"Maybe...add two-tenths of a silver ingot."

The man was very perplexed. Why was this kid asking for such an affordable pay increase?

Nevertheless, despite his puzzlement, he readily agreed and gave the letter to Sun Yuan, and Sun Yuan eventually delivered it to Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu took one glance at the letter in his hand. Then he raised his head, and his probing gaze landed on Sun Yuan, who immediately felt uneasy under his scrutiny. The boy barely even dared to breathe as he stood there, as rigid as a bamboo pole.

“Who told you to deliver this to me?” Huo Wujiu asked in a low voice.

“I-I didn’t recognize...” Sun Yuan stuttered, trailing off.

“I meant,” Huo Wujiu cut in, “who granted you permission to deliver letters to me?”

His Highness told me not to say, the boy thought to himself miserably, lips trembling.

Even though he didn’t say a single word, his appearance told Huo Wujiu all that he needed to know.

...Unbelievable.

While he had visited Yecheng once or twice with his father in his youth, he couldn’t remember ever having met the Prince of Jing, not even in passing. What had he been talking about? It was beyond absurd of the prince to say that he was “deeply fond” of Huo Wujiu.

Yet when Huo Wujiu connected his words to his behavior from the past few days, that did seem to be the case...

It made sense, with the way he acted like a sheep in wolf's clothing. He put up a tough front while inexplicably treating him exceedingly well.

If the prince insisted on developing some inexplicable feelings for him, Huo Wujiu couldn't exactly stop him. He had observed the prince watching him closely and looking after him over the past few days, thinking he was as stealthy as a thief. That wasn't what Huo Wujiu was most concerned about, though.

He was a prisoner of war from an enemy nation, detained here in the prince's residence. He knew that the only reason he was able to receive this letter was because the prince had allowed it. Was the Prince of Jing truly either so bold or so stupid? Or rather...

Huo Wujiu frowned in confusion, idly rubbing his thumb against the paper in his hand.

Could such fondness truly blind someone to this extent? So much so that he would put the object of his affection before his own country and life?

Huo Wujiu had always been a master of military strategy and tactics, but he was clueless when it came to matters of the heart. He didn't have any experience with them, which momentarily impacted his judgment, his thoughts suddenly thrown into disarray.

It felt as if, regardless of whatever plans he made or actions he took, he would inevitably be taking advantage of the prince's affection for him.

After Sun Yuan tactfully withdrew from the room, Huo Wujiu opened the letter.

The paper was somewhat crumpled from the force that the writer had exerted on it, a sign of the righteous fury that had consumed the writer as he penned the message.

Huo Wujiu glanced out the window.

In the courtyard, Meng Qianshan was conversing with the carpenter who had delivered the wheelchair, and the carpenter was hurriedly jotting down notes on a piece of paper; it seemed like Meng Qianshan was asking him to make modifications. As soon as Sun Yuan stepped outside, Meng Qianshan summoned him over to sit on the wheelchair, so he could try pushing him around the courtyard.

They seemed to be testing the wheelchair's sturdiness.

Lowering his gaze again, Huo Wujiu unfolded the letter.

Over a decade has passed since I parted ways with His Lordship, the former marquis. Following the Battle of Xunyang, my grief came in tandem with my rage, and I could barely restrain myself. Yet there was little that I could do, for I earn my living through serving this nation. For that reason, even though we are both presently within the city of Lin'an, I still find myself too ashamed to face you.

By this point, some of the characters were blurred beneath dried splotches of tears.

Huo Wujiu's brow wrinkled, and he flipped to the very last page of the letter, where the writer's signature was.

Ji Hongcheng

He did, in fact, have a vague impression of this person, even if in a rather roundabout sort of way. Though Southern Jing lacked generals, he recalled that his father's old friend, Lou Yue, was among the handful of qualified ones they had. The man who wrote this letter used to be one of Lou Yue's subordinates in the army, but he had since taken up a position in the Ministry of War.

Huo Wujiu flipped back to the first page.

Every word in the letter dripped with Ji Hongcheng's distress and remorse, but Huo Wujiu wasn't offended by his choices and didn't need his apologies.

Years ago, before his father's revolt, the previous emperor had feared the Huo family. As such, he deliberately cut off their reinforcements and supply lines at a critical moment during war. After the fighting ended, he used those circumstances to level an accusation against the Huo family, so he could find an excuse to execute the entire clan. That was why Huo Wujiu's father chose to revolt: because of the deep grudge and enmity between him and the former emperor. In reality, it had nothing to do with the nation as a whole, nor had he expected his peers to rally around him the way they had.

A court official's fundamental duties should include serving the nation and remaining loyal to the emperor. Rising in rebellion for the sake of brotherhood was something that only occurred in fanciful tales of martial arts heroes.

Huo Wujiu's gaze skated impassively across the sincere lines that Ji Hongcheng had bared his heart to write, and he honed in on the section that came after.

General, I am aware that you're currently facing a challenging situation. I earnestly hope that your resolve for vengeance will only be strengthened by these trials, even if you must endure this heavy burden of humiliation for now.

As he read on, his eyebrow ticked up ever so slightly.

The Prince of Jing is not a man of good character. Today, during the court assembly, he engaged in most vulgar conversation with His Majesty. With no sense of shame, he openly discussed the intimate relations he shared with you, General, in front of the court. Thereafter, His Majesty ordered for you to be brought in for an audience with him. The Prince of Jing's loathing and disgust was beyond evident in his words and actions! Even at the cost of giving up the construction rights to the ancestral temple, he would rather keep you imprisoned in his residence.

This person's vile and despicable nature speaks for itself, so do take care of yourself, General. At present, General Lou is stationed in Lingnan subduing bandits, and words from a man in my lowly position carry little weight, thus rendering me powerless. It is truly difficult for me to repay the debt of gratitude I owe to His Lordship, the former marquis, from all those years ago. However, worry not, General. If there comes a day when your humble subordinate can be of use, I will most assuredly do everything in my power to assist.

The letter was rather short, and it concluded there.

Huo Wujiu quickly held it above the lamp on the table that Sun Yuan had purposefully lit for him. The flame licked across the paper, instantly burning one corner to ashes.

All of a sudden, Huo Wujiu jerked his hand and pulled the letter back from the fire, almost automatically.

He allowed his gaze to fall back on the second-to-last paragraph of the partially burned letter. And then once more. And again, and again...

By the time he came to his senses, he had almost memorized it word for word. Somewhat startled by his own impulsive actions, he rapidly resumed feeding the letter to the fire. After that, he also burned the envelope it came in until nothing was left.

The flame flickered slightly in his eyes.

Huo Wujiu stared at it as several deep furrows formed between his brows.

How very unexpected.

Even his father's old friend, full of regret and aching for an opportunity to repent, knew to keep his distance and put his own safety first.

And then there was that timid white rabbit, who acted fierce while being harmless at heart, and who by all logic should not have cared about Huo Wujiu as much as he apparently did. That rabbit stepped forward and intervened on his behalf in court. He even willingly forfeited the power that he had managed to obtain, all so Huo Wujiu would be subjected to a little less humiliation—that, and nothing more.

He never thought that he would one day be protected by someone with such frail, thin shoulders.

Chapter 17

NATURALLY, JIANG SUIZHOU had no idea what kind of defamatory remarks were being made about him in the confidential letter that Huo Wujiu had received. After happily slacking off for an entire day in the Ministry of Rites, he returned to his residence and immediately holed up in his study.

Because of the brief conversation he had with Ji You the other day, the minister had warmed up to him considerably. He even brought two books to the office today, with the offer to lend them to Jiang Suizhou so he could read them at his leisure.

Of course, those books were on the topic of unofficial history.

Due to his current and rather extensive personal experience, Jiang Suizhou couldn't exactly say that he was fond of the subject. Still, he couldn't reject the hand of friendship that Ji You was extending, and so he accepted the books and thanked Ji You for his kindness. Upon returning home, he set them down on the desk in his study as he passed by.

Whoever wanted to read them could read them. He certainly wasn't going to risk inexplicably transmigrating again just as he was settling into things here.

Moreover, he had other matters to attend to, such as the letter sent to him by the two Ministry of Works officials.

After receiving the letter early in the morning, he'd promptly stashed it away out of an abundance of caution. Only now, when there was no one else around, did he finally open it up.

As he'd more or less expected, though, the letter didn't offer any particularly useful intel.

The two court officials didn't have high-ranking positions—they just happened to be in the Ministry of Works. Because of that, however, once the commission was taken over by their department, they were easily able to find out what the budget was, as well as who was in charge, just by asking around a little. They even calculated for Jiang Suizhou how much profit Pang Shao would likely be able to skim off the top.

Sure enough, it was a considerable sum.

The two officials seemed rather worried by this. In the letter, they asked Jiang Suizhou if they should slip a few of their own people into the construction project.

Jiang Suizhou sank into thought.

Based on his current understanding of the original owner of his body, the Prince of Jing would've undoubtedly taken action. Even if he knew he wouldn't receive any recompense for it, even if it would surely result in some sort of loss, he still would've had to try.

But Jiang Suizhou also knew that all his efforts would be pointless.

There was no way Pang Shao would allow money to pass through the hands of an official he didn't trust. Even if the prince sneaked in some officials from his own faction, he wouldn't be able to touch the money being siphoned from the imperial court. In such circumstances, the only thing that a spy could do was gather evidence of the embezzlement so it could be reported to the court.

But what was Pang Shao's relationship with the emperor? And what was the Prince of Jing's relationship with the emperor?

The Prince of Jing was clearly seeking his own destruction if he did such a thing. It was practically asking for the emperor to dig up something to use against him in punishment.

Not only that, the planted officials would also be pushed into the line of fire, and it would be extremely easy for Pang Shao to take shots at them.

Prior to transmigrating, Jiang Suizhou had read many historical accounts where numerous Southern Jing officials met unexpected deaths during certain construction projects—deaths that were never conclusively investigated.

Jiang Suizhou didn't dare to gamble with someone's life, especially not for such high risk and so little reward.

After a moment of contemplation, he pored over the letter once more and roughly made note of the figures and names mentioned within. Then he stored the letter in the hidden compartment next to his desk.

It had initially taken Jiang Suizhou a significant amount of effort to find that hidden compartment, which had been stuffed with correspondence the original prince had saved. It wasn't exactly a gold mine of information, but it'd allowed him to gain a rough estimate of the original prince's scope of power.

For the most part, the intel collected in the hidden letters was fragmented and disjointed; nothing really worth delving deeper into. Based on the positions held by the officials who'd penned the letters, those people didn't have much power of their own, and it seemed they had exhausted all of their capabilities just to obtain these few pitiful scraps.

Those officials had scraped together the information before passing it along to the original prince, who hadn't let their hard work go to waste.

Every single letter in the compartment was heavily marked up, dotted with circles and annotations—a clear testament to how diligently the original prince must have read over them.

After putting the new letter away with the rest, Jiang Suizhou carefully locked the compartment and began crafting a reply to the two officials.

He didn't reject their offer outright. Instead, he instructed them to bide their time, while he would play it by ear. When the opportunity came and he found a chance to slip some of their people in, he would notify them at once.

Luckily, there were a few letters in the study that the original prince had yet to send out. Using those letters as a reference, Jiang Suizhou was able to passably mimic the original prince's tone and finish writing his response.

Once he was done, Jiang Suizhou read over his reply one more time as he waited for the ink to dry.

He couldn't stop himself from sighing.

Three years had passed since the emperor of Southern Jing fled across the Yangtze River, and it seemed the people had already accepted the current state of affairs. Southern Jing no longer feared for their imminent destruction. A delicate equilibrium had developed, where each side of the river was governed by a different authority.

That deadlock had lasted until a little over a month ago, when Huo Wujiu shattered the illusion of relative peace by advancing south with his army. However, since his expected reinforcements never arrived, he found himself besieged and taken prisoner as he was crossing the river.

Now that Northern Liang had lost the fearsome General Huo, Southern Jing's court officials naturally grew even more nonchalant.

That was precisely why Pang Shao felt emboldened enough to engage in unbridled embezzling and monopolizing with absolutely no shame, and why the emperor cared only for indulging in the pleasures of life.

Meanwhile, the original Prince of Jing and his allies were trapped in the crevices of the court. They attempted to light a path out of the darkness by desperately scrabbling for whatever scraps of power they could wrest away from Pang Shao and his faction.

None of them had any idea that their days were numbered. How could they have known that the dynasty of Southern Jing was about to crumble?

They were all desperately trying to climb a tower that was already on the verge of collapse.

Jiang Suizhou looked out the window.

He was slowly starting to accept the reality of his current situation, that he'd somehow been ripped out of the modern day and deposited into this particular period of history. Moreover, he'd been thrown into the turbulent tide that was the final years of a waning nation.

It was becoming harder to fight the urge to try to help.

By the time he emerged from the study, it was already dark outside. He handed the confidential letter to Meng Qianshan, who then tucked it into

his robes in one practiced movement.

Jiang Suizhou withdrew his gaze, reassured.

His complexion seemed to worsen whenever he sat still for long stretches of time, perhaps because his body was on the frailer side to begin with.

“You must be tired, Master,” Meng Qianshan said, noticing that his lips were a bit pale. “Would you like your servant to draw a bath for you?”

Now that Meng Qianshan brought it up, Jiang Suizhou immediately felt the fatigue catch up with him.

He nodded, and Meng Qianshan swiftly complied.

Jiang Suizhou returned to his room to see that the evening meal had already been prepared. Huo Wujiu sat at the table, reading in the gentle glow of the lamplight.

What kind of books were in his room? They were all books that Meng Qianshan had brought over for the original prince to occupy himself with before sleeping. The original prince favored those dense, ancient Confucian texts about principles of effective governance and the like. Jiang Suizhou was used to reading classical texts, so it wasn't boring to him, but he thought it safe to assume the same couldn't be said for Huo Wujiu.

Those who wielded swords and blades would hardly have the patience to read such books.

“Reading?” Jiang Suizhou asked as he sat down at the table.

He kept his voice very flat, clearly displaying his disinterest in whatever the answer might be. In fact, he didn't expect Huo Wujiu to pay any attention to him, let alone answer. That was perfectly fine, though; he

was simply setting the scene for his next remark. He was about to instruct Meng Qianshan to bring Huo Wujiu some lighter reading when a deep, mellow voice suddenly spoke.

“Just skimming,” Huo Wujiu said.

Startled, Jiang Suizhou looked over at Huo Wujiu in disbelief, only to find him calmly minding his own business and now eating his dinner.

His carefully phrased follow-up command to Meng Qianshan stalled in his mouth, and for a moment, he said nothing.

Then Huo Wujiu lifted his gaze and glanced indifferently at him.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't shake the impression that the antagonism in Huo Wujiu's eyes had faded markedly. Even though his expression was still cold and overwhelmingly unapproachable, the aura of oppressiveness and complete loathing had mostly dissipated.

In fact, Huo Wujiu's eyes were so placid that Jiang Suizhou was sure he must have been imagining things.

He quickly covered up his astonishment by coolly looking down to pick up a bite of food.

“I see. What sort of books do you usually read?” he said casually. “I'll have Meng Qianshan bring some over for you.”

As he spoke, he shot a meaningful look at Meng Qianshan, who stood some distance away.

Meng Qianshan understood and bobbed his head eagerly.

“No need,” Huo Wujiu said.

There was a beat of silence while Huo Wujiu looked at Jiang Suizhou steadily.

“I’m not used to being taken care of,” he added.

They both knew he wasn’t just referring to the books, but to everything that had happened over the past few days. It was Huo Wujiu’s way of acknowledging the sacrifice that the Prince of Jing had made in the court and the way he had allowed letters to be passed along to him.

If the Prince of Jing was determined to like him, he couldn’t do anything about that. However, he refused to accept the preferential treatment and goodwill being forcefully lavished upon him.

Receiving someone’s kindness meant he should return the same to them, but it was impossible for him to return such feelings.

Across from him, Jiang Suizhou glanced up. A fleeting trace of surprise flashed across his eyes, immediately extinguished by a sneer.

“Oh? Don’t flatter yourself. I’m simply keeping you busy so you don’t cause trouble for me.”

Internally, Jiang Suizhou was filled with glee.

Now, now, that attitude won’t do! I’d like to keep my head attached to my neck, so I certainly don’t intend to stop. In fact, I’m going to be taking care of you in many more ways in the future, so you better get used to it, buddy!

Huo Wujiu frowned. Just as he was about to answer, Meng Qianshan interrupted.

Nodding enthusiastically, the eunuch assured his master that he would bring an assortment of books over for Madam in a bit so he could choose from among them.

Evidently, neither member of this master-servant duo planned to listen to Huo Wujiu's opinion on the matter.

He cast his eyes down, and Jiang Suizhou didn't speak again either. Once they were done eating, they each retreated to opposite sides of the room to drink tea and digest their dinner.

Jiang Suizhou was in a fairly good mood.

As evening shifted into night, Meng Qianshan sidled up to him and informed him that the bath in the rear chamber was ready for him.

Nodding, Jiang Suizhou set aside his book and headed to the room in the back.

As he circled around the silk folding screen, steam drifted lazily across his face. Lit candles glimmered beneath numerous layers of gauzy curtains, adding an ethereal, almost romantic element to the hazy scene.

A copper bath decorated with carvings sat in the center of the room, sunken in the floor. It wasn't particularly large, measuring approximately three by five feet. The bath had already been filled with hot water, and there were even petals strewn across the surface, suffusing the air with their faint, delicate fragrance.

Several maidservants stood to the side, seemingly waiting to attend to Jiang Suizhou as he bathed.

...That would be highly improper.

Averting his gaze, Jiang Suizhou waved his hand and gestured for them to leave.

The maidservants obediently withdrew from the room. They didn't make any noise as they moved, their footsteps silent, and it wasn't long

before they had all exited.

Jiang Suizhou looked back at Meng Qianshan.

“You’re also dismissed.”

“Huh?” Meng Qianshan blinked in surprise.

Since when did his master ever bathe without anyone attending to him? Well, apart from when he was at Madam Gu’s... *Oh*.

A sudden realization washed over Meng Qianshan.

How could he have been so thoughtless as to assume he’d be the one to serve His Highness when there was a mistress right outside?

“Yes, Master!” he responded with obvious delight, nodding repeatedly. “Your servant will withdraw at once!”

Maybe it was just Jiang Suizhou’s imagination, but for some reason, something about Meng Qianshan’s expression was almost a little...well, perverted.

After Meng Qianshan left, Jiang Suizhou walked over to the bath and stooped to test the temperature. Then he started to shed the many layers of clothing he was wearing, placing the robes on a nearby rack.

Now that he was completely alone, he was finally able to relax, and he began mulling over his future plans once more.

In a few days, it would be time for another Grand Assembly. Before then, he should make the time to discuss the contents of that letter with his two most personal advisors...

He continued to undress as he pondered. As he untied the sash of his inner robe, about to shrug it off his shoulders, he heard a distinct noise from behind him.

Jiang Suizhou turned.

There was Huo Wujiu, looking much like a statue of Buddha that'd been rolled in; he was sitting upright and proper in his wheelchair, his face completely and utterly devoid of any expression. Behind him, Meng Qianshan's smile was sly and lecherous.

Jiang Suizhou's thoughts screeched to a halt. Instantly, he understood what kind of foul scheme this blasted Meng Qianshan had cooked up. The sheer audacity of it was truly mind-blowing.

Seriously, how dare he set him up for a couple's bath with Huo Wujiu?!

Chapter 18

JIANG SUIZHOU'S GAZE transformed from astonishment to rage.

He was so furious, so mortified, that as the blood rushed to his head even the roots of his ears flushed red. His jaw clenched and unclenched a few times before he could find his voice.

"Meng Qianshan!"

The eunuch froze. Only now did he realize that there had been a grave misunderstanding on his part.

Meng Qianshan should be grateful that he isn't dealing with the original owner of this body, Jiang Suizhou thought. Otherwise, the walls would already be coated in his blood as he prayed for a swift death.

"Your servant...n-noticed that His Highness rejected the s-services of all of your subordinates," he stammered in abject terror. "So I assumed... since the bath is fairly large, a-and it might be more convenient... So I... I..."

He couldn't even finish his own excuse.

Jiang Suizhou realized suddenly how chilly the air felt against his exposed skin and swiftly pulled his inner robe snug around himself. He took a deep breath.

"Did you forget? The physician changed his bandages only two days ago, with instructions that they remain dry," he said, trying his best to keep his voice steady. "If your brain continues to prove itself so useless, Meng Qianshan, I'll have someone remove it for you."

Jiang Suizhou's body was frail. Just this spate of anger made his voice tremble.

Still, it was enough to scare Meng Qianshan witless. Gripping the wheelchair, he cast everything else aside and fled back to the bedroom. Despite his panic, he dared not jostle Huo Wujiu a fraction, though he stumbled over himself the entire way.

Jiang Suizhou sighed in relief and disrobed again. The entire infuriating ordeal had left his thoughts in disarray, but he wasn't about to let a hot bath go to waste. It had been meticulously prepared just for him, after all.

The moment he stepped in, it proved to be an intensely wonderful experience. Jiang Suizhou shed every thought in his head to focus on simply soaking in the blissful warm bath.

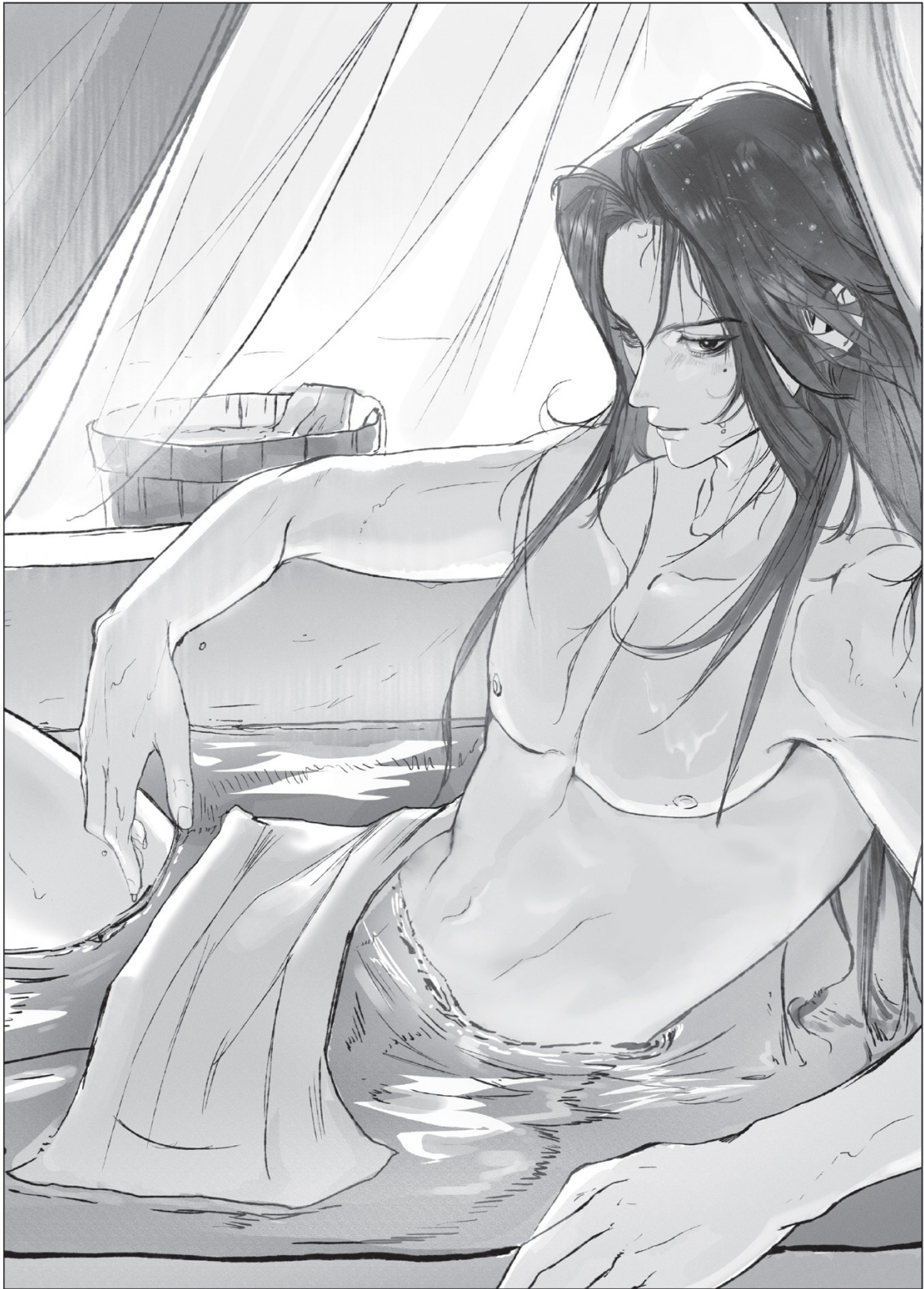
Eventually, he grew a bit tired and finished up. After changing into new sleepwear, he returned to the bedroom to find that Meng Qianshan had already run off in fear, along with the other servants Jiang Suizhou had already dismissed. The only other person in the room was Huo Wujiu, who was currently sitting in his wheelchair and quietly reading a book.

Jiang Suizhou felt a bit awkward.

What had that fool Meng Qianshan been thinking, pushing Huo Wujiu into the room while he was bathing?!

As he dried his hair, he made his way to the daybed and took a seat. Perhaps it was just due to the unexpected, relatively friendly interaction they'd had at dinner, but Jiang Suizhou felt compelled to speak to him now in a much more relaxed and open manner.

"Meng Qianshan was being foolish," he said.



Huo Wujiu put down the book.

“It’s fine,” he responded indifferently.

Then he wheeled himself to the back to wash up, and Jiang Suizhou secretly sighed in relief.

It wasn’t his imagination, then. Although Huo Wujiu’s attitude toward him was still cold, he was now willing to talk to him.

...Even if it was just to reject him.

But still, this proved that his efforts hadn’t been in vain. It seemed Huo Wujiu had begun to notice his intentions.

Jiang Suizhou watched him disappear behind the screen, then looked away. He picked up the book he’d been reading earlier and moved to resume reading on the daybed.

But the moment he lay down on it, something felt different. Pressing lightly on the cushion, he realized that it was an entire layer thicker than before. Someone had also swapped the pillow for a softer one and laid out a very cozy-looking blanket.

It seemed Meng Qianshan really had swallowed the nonsense he’d fed him this morning and had diligently prepared all this to alleviate his suffering.

Crawling into the plush bed, Jiang Suizhou granted Meng Qianshan a swift and complete pardon for his earlier blunder.

Was there anything in the world more blissful than enjoying a restful night’s sleep?

For now, nothing.

The moment Huo Wujiu rolled into the bathroom, out of view, he brought the wheelchair to a halt.

His hand slipped almost imperceptibly.

The room was still warm and humid, and steam wafted toward his face. Petals swayed gently in the ripples of the vacant bath pool, shrouded in hazy white mist, with traces of water on the floor nearby. Next to the bath, the robes that man had removed remained draped over a copper rack.

The scene was still so evocative that Huo Wujiu couldn't help but recall certain details of the incident he'd just witnessed.

For instance, the way the prince's long black hair hung loose and disheveled as his inner robe began to slip, and the way he inadvertently exposed the smooth skin of his chest and waist when he turned to look at Huo Wujiu in shock.

Huo Wujiu had been in the army for years and had seen more than his share of male bodies. During the summer, the entire group of men would even head to the river and bathe together.

But...for some reason, the Prince of Jing stood out from among them.

Huo Wujiu had never seen a man quite like him before. He struggled to think of any suitable, nonerotic words with which to describe him.

What exactly was it that made the prince so—

Huo Wujiu could only spare him a brief glance before hastily averting his eyes. Was it simply the fact he'd been grown up sheltered,

never weathering the sun or rain, or that his appearance was naturally far too striking?

Or perhaps it was partially due to the prince's reaction to being observed? That made sense. It was completely normal for soldiers to be naked in front of one another, and the men he'd seen never behaved as if they felt anything amiss. None were like the Prince of Jing, who hurriedly wrapped himself up without a word and blushed to his ears in embarrassment.

...Much like a very large maiden.

That mischievous notion floated to the surface of Huo Wujiu's mind, unbidden. While he had little to no experience with any sort of maiden, thinking of Jiang Suizhou in this way unexpectedly made his heart beat a little faster.

Jiang Suizhou slept soundly straight through the night until the next morning. He woke up feeling refreshed, and even his body felt lighter.

Meng Qianshan had risen early to prepare breakfast. Perhaps it was because he'd upset Jiang Suizhou the night before, but today's table was exceptionally lavish and filled with a spread of Jiang Suizhou's favorite dishes.

Glancing at Meng Qianshan, Jiang Suizhou noted his particularly awkward and ingratiating smile.

Jiang Suizhou said nothing as he coolly shifted his gaze elsewhere. It was good to scare him a little, to prevent him from acting so presumptuously in the future and causing more trouble.

Thus, it wasn't until the meal was finished that Jiang Suizhou addressed Meng Qianshan with an icy tone.

"Will Madam Huo's bandages be changed today?" he asked.

"The doctor will arrive later today, Your Highness," Meng Qianshan answered, nodding repeatedly. "Please don't worry."

Jiang Suizhou hummed an acknowledgment, then paused.

"What's the date today?" he asked.

"The eighth, Your Highness," Meng Qianshan replied promptly.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

"It's been four days. Send someone to Madam Gu's courtyard later, and tell them I'll have dinner there tonight."

Meng Qianshan was dumbfounded.

Your Highness! How could you say that in front of Madam Huo?!

Meng Qianshan continued to stare blankly until Jiang Suizhou shot him a questioning, sidelong glance that finally prompted an answer.

"Yes," Meng Qianshan said with a stiff nod, "your servant will make the arrangements..."

Jiang Suizhou frowned at him, confused.

Why was Meng Qianshan staring at him as if he were some heartless scoundrel?

Jiang Suizhou quickly looked over at Huo Wujiu, suddenly concerned. What if he noticed Meng Qianshan's strange demeanor and misunderstood the situation?

However, Huo Wujiu's eyes were lowered, and he seemed fully engrossed in his meal, as if he hadn't heard a thing.

Then again, why would he care? He'd been living quite harmoniously with Jiang Suizhou these past few days. Plus, Jiang Suizhou had never done anything out of line, and surely Huo Wujiu understood that their relationship was very different from his relationship with Gu Changyun and Xu Du.

...Even though his relationship with the concubines was also purely chaste and explicitly platonic.

Feeling at ease about the situation now, Jiang Suizhou rose from the table and headed to the Ministry of Rites to continue slacking off.

Only Meng Qianshan remained, looking at Huo Wujiu with a worried expression.

He finally understood that saying: "The emperor is calm, while the eunuchs are anxious."

Which head was he doing his thinking with, anyway?!

Just yesterday, His Highness had spoken to him with heartfelt sincerity, professing his deep love for Madam Huo and insisting he could never bring himself to mistreat him. Yet the very next day, he went skipping off to another concubine's residence! And right in front of Madam Huo, no less!

Meng Qianshan looked anxiously at Madam Huo, who seemed as cold and indifferent as usual.

Still, perhaps he should say something to Madam Huo about this? Although the man looked utterly unaffected, it wouldn't be right for Meng Qianshan to allow His Highness to leave the impression of being so fickle.

He continued to ponder this as he instructed a maid to deliver His Highness's order to Madam Gu's courtyard. When he returned to stand in front of Huo Wujiu, he made the decision to speak with extreme caution.

"Madam Gu was one of His Majesty's first concubines, as you are well aware, Mistress," he said, smiling.

Calling him "Mistress" was Meng Qianshan's way of showing respect to Huo Wujiu. Usually, such terms were only used by the servants in the rear courtyard when addressing their own mistresses. As a high-ranking eunuch attending to the Prince of Jing, Meng Qianshan would typically not lower himself to use it to address any concubine.

Huo Wujiu glanced at Meng Qianshan, only to see that fawning smile still plastered firmly across his face.

"Madam Gu is a bit spoiled," Meng Qianshan continued comfortingly. "He'll kick up a fuss if he goes too many days without seeing His Highness, which His Highness finds to be quite a pain. He indulges Madam Gu only because he dislikes the tantrums, not because he particularly favors him."

Huo Wujiu frowned.

Why was he telling him this? As if he should care where the Prince of Jing went. The eunuch spoke to him as if he were one of the jilted lovers in the rear courtyard.

Meng Qianshan rambled on.

“Besides, Madam Gu isn’t the most reasonable person. His Highness might not be able to protect you from his jealous fits the way he is now, should Madam Gu decide to make trouble for you in the courtyard.”

Annoyed by his incessant chatter, Huo Wujiu was about to tell him to shut up already, but the eunuch’s next words caught him off guard.

“So you see, His Highness is spending the night with him for your sake, really!”

Something about the phrase “spending the night with him” caught in his mind and summoned that scene to flash before his eyes once again.

He remembered the Prince of Jing as he blushed all the way to his ears with embarrassment and anger, his inner robes revealing his supple and slender waist.

And he also remembered the sound of his soft, gentle voice that one early morning, when he confessed his long-held affections toward Huo Wujiu.

All these thoughts conjured an unexpected question in the back of Huo Wujiu’s mind: What would that kind of man look like when he was spending the night with another man?

He froze.

Just what was he thinking?!

The thought struck him so abruptly that when he snapped back to his senses, he felt disoriented and out of sorts. Mild annoyance surged forth to compensate for the mental disarray.

He glared coldly at Meng Qianshan.

That one look was enough to make Meng Qianshan's throat tighten. He immediately shut his mouth and stared fearfully back at Huo Wujiu.

Though their lines of sight were uneven and Huo Wujiu's menacing glare came from below him, it was so authoritative that Meng Qianshan felt a fleeting but intense urge to drop to his knees before him.

Huo Wujiu paused.

Why was he picking a fight with a eunuch who had a screw loose?

With that, he withdrew his gaze.

Huo Wujiu was the Prince of Jing's concubine in name only. To him, it was merely a change of prison. And if the imperial prison couldn't break his spirit, this place would fare no better. He would not allow anything here to wear him down like that, and he certainly wouldn't stoop to menacing a eunuch over something so trivial.

Huo Wujiu looked up at Meng Qianshan.

"Get out," he said.

There was nothing remotely gentle or kind in his tone, and his gaze seemed fiercer than ever.

Chapter 19

AS EXPECTED, when Jiang Suizhou entered Gu Changyun's quarters that night, he found Xu Du waiting there as well.

The room was empty except for the three of them, the table set with food by servants who had already been dismissed.

When they saw Jiang Suizhou enter, the two men bowed to him, and Gu Changyun poured him some tea.

Jiang Suizhou sat down at the head of the table.

"When I received word that His Highness planned to visit, I had the servants prepare a sweet and sour mandarin fish," Gu Changyun said, smiling. "Just for you."

He nudged the plate in front of Jiang Suizhou encouragingly.

"Try it, Your Highness?"

Jiang Suizhou had never been fond of sweet flavors, especially not the sweet and sour dishes so prominent in Jiangnan cuisine. Come to think of it, his dining table had been mostly filled with northern dishes these past several days.

He was a bit puzzled. Did the original owner of the body like sweets?

As he looked suspiciously at Gu Changyun, the man raised an eyebrow, his expression a tad surprised.

"Won't you eat it, Your Highness?"

Jiang Suizhou didn't speak. He picked up a piece of fish with his chopsticks.

Plopping it into his mouth, he found the fish was sweet and fragrant, but so cloying that Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but frown.

His chopsticks came to a halt.

Though the soul inhabiting the Prince of Jing was Jiang Suizhou's, the physical body still ultimately belonged to the original prince. Though sometimes dietary preferences were dictated by a person's experiences, Jiang Suizhou had no particular psychological aversion to sweets. He simply didn't care much for them. Thus, the intense disgust he felt right now in reaction to this piece of fish must have been rooted in this body's natural physiology.

So, if the original owner avoided sweets, this meant that Gu Changyun was testing him.

Jiang Suizhou chewed a few times, then gazed evenly at Gu Changyun.

Gu Changyun sent him a small smile. He appeared somewhat relieved, his doubts dispelled.

Jiang Suizhou didn't speak, just looked at him coldly. His gaze carried a hint of both scrutiny and warning—something that did not go unnoticed by Gu Changyun, whose eyelashes flickered slightly in response.

"As I expected, His Highness still dislikes sweets," he said cheerily. "It's a pity, don't you think? Such a famous Jiangnan dish, yet it hasn't earned Your Highness's appreciation even once over the past three years."

Jiang Suizhou slowly put down his chopsticks.

"You certainly have guts," he said coolly, looking down at the table.

Gu Changyun watched him. For a moment, he didn't speak.

“Did you get the result you wanted?” Jiang Suizhou asked flatly.

Gu Changyun paused, then chuckled softly.

“What are you saying, Your Highness? Your subordinate only noticed how fresh today’s delivery of mandarin fish was, so I had them prepare it for Your Highness to try.”

Jiang Suizhou’s fingers tapped slowly on the table.

Anyone familiar with him—Jiang Suizhou himself, not the Prince of Jing—would immediately recognize this gesture as habitual. He tended to do it when thinking deeply, such as when he uncovered a lie and had to plot his next move.

Clearly they’d realized he wasn’t the original owner of this body.

He had anticipated such an outcome. These two were the original prince’s highly trusted, handpicked advisors, so of course they’d be tougher to fool than ordinary chumps. Even if they hadn’t spent every second by his side, they must have known him quite well.

Still, he didn’t expect they would start testing him on their second meeting. That meant that they’d noticed something was off about him from day one.

The soft tapping of his fingers against the wooden table echoed in the quiet room.

At this moment, Xu Du, who’d been sitting to the side, spoke up.

“Please forgive him, Your Highness. Changyun is just a little mischievous, that’s all,” he said as he rose.

Xu Du paused to give a deep bow.

“Still, His Highness can rest assured,” he continued. “No matter what happens, his loyalty to you will remain as unwavering as heaven and earth.”

Jiang Suizhou knew the additional, specific meaning Xu Du intended his words to convey. He was telling him that no matter who he’d become now, they would stay allied with him as long as he was still their master.

He lowered his eyes and took a sip of tea, washing away the cloying sweetness that permeated his mouth.

Words were empty. Naturally, he couldn’t believe them so easily.

At the same time, he realized that they were currently at a bit of an impasse. The three of them had reached an unspoken understanding regarding his identity. They’d tested him, he’d given a warning, and the other side had affirmed their loyalty and goodwill. Applying further pressure at this point would achieve nothing.

He would need to determine whether Xu Du’s loyalty was genuine, but that would require proof. Until he could gather that, his priority was to find a way of securing leverage over them to prevent any potential betrayal.

Jiang Suizhou picked up his chopsticks again. Then, as if the confrontation hadn’t happened at all, he calmly brought up the letter he’d received yesterday.

Xu Du and Gu Changyun also acted as if nothing had happened. Following his example, they began discussing the contents of the letter in detail.

Just as before, the two were logical and methodical and offered sharp insight. Their suggestions often struck the mark, as far as aligning with Jiang Suizhou’s knowledge of the historical records.

It was as if they really were talking to the original prince, the way they completely devoted their attention and energy to the discussion without holding back.

Was it a deliberate act, or were they truly that unconcerned about his identity? Regardless of their reasons, their analysis proved valuable, and after careful contemplation, Jiang Suizhou noted down the segments he believed to be useful.

Once they were done eating and discussing all the recent events, Jiang Suizhou departed.

Although spending the night here wouldn't be a big deal, the thought of it felt a bit torturous. His true identity had been exposed. He couldn't stay here in the quarters of the original owner's subordinates now that they knew his most dire secret.

Xu Du and Gu Changyun stood up and cupped their hands, seeing him off.

Once the attendants and servants had escorted Jiang Suizhou out of the courtyard, the two of them finally returned to their seats at the table.

"He saw through it," Gu Changyun said with a soft chuckle.

Xu Du shot him a disapproving look.

"I told you not to tease him."

Gu Changyun raised an eyebrow indifferently.

"I hadn't expected him to be so sharp, that's all," he said. "But look, he wasn't upset, was he?"

Xu Du glanced at him.

"Not necessarily," he said.

Gu Changyun laughed again.

“Ah, who cares?” he said. “I just want to see what our new clever, softhearted lord will do next.”

Jiang Suizhou returned to Anyin Hall, but he didn't head to his bedroom. Instead, he went to the study, taking advantage of the early hour.

The original owner had amassed a substantial amount of information in the study. However, it was well concealed, and the sheer quantity meant that Jiang Suizhou had yet to sift through everything.

At the moment, though, he was on the hunt for something in particular. He had a hunch and suspected the information needed to verify it was hidden somewhere in the study. Though the search lasted four hours, it eventually paid off.

Around midnight, he found a seemingly unremarkable account book hidden deep inside the desk.

Inside that book, Jiang Suizhou found records of a very substantial recurring transaction. On the fifteenth of each month, the original prince would personally entrust a large amount of money to Xu Du.

Additionally, the book recorded another set of expenses that also recurred on the fifteenth. It varied slightly each month, but the amounts themselves were very small.

Normally, such expenses weren't significant enough to warrant being recorded. But since they had been, the money must have served a very

important purpose.

Jiang Suizhou began swiftly forming a plan.

He pondered in his study for a long time, until finally Meng Qianshan came to remind him that he had to attend the Grand Assembly the next day. Only then did he carefully put away the account book and return to his bedroom.

At this point, it was late at night. Most of the servants had already gone to bed, except for a handful on night watch.

Meng Qianshan pushed open the door for him. When Jiang Suizhou stepped in, he saw Huo Wujiu sitting under the lamp, reading a book.

He had his head propped on one hand, a frown on his face as he nodded off from time to time. It seemed he was struggling to understand the book's contents, for he looked a little annoyed.

Hearing the noise at the door, Huo Wujiu looked up and saw Jiang Suizhou taking off his cloak as he walked into the room.

His gaze paused almost imperceptibly on Jiang Suizhou.

...Why had he returned?

Jiang Suizhou handed his cloak to Meng Qianshan and turned to find Huo Wujiu sitting there, book in one hand and behaving as if he hadn't seen him at all.

The sight inexplicably put Jiang Suizhou at ease.

Even though he'd been slacking off at the Ministry of Rites, he still had to remain vigilant around his colleagues and rigorously maintain the persona of the Prince of Jing. Then when he returned to his residence, those two quick-witted advisors decided they'd keep him on his toes as well.

In contrast, Huo Wujiu would barely look at him, let alone speak to him. His complete indifference to Jiang Suizhou's presence made him feel like he actually had room to breathe.

Amid this atmosphere, Jiang Suizhou even felt the faint echo of the sort of joy one feels upon returning home.

Jiang Suizhou sighed at that thought. Just how bleak had his life become for him to find anything about Huo Wujiu endearing?

Meng Qianshan heard his sigh and, assuming it must have been due to exhaustion, quickly came to support him.

As Meng Qianshan led Jiang Suizhou to the back to wash up, Huo Wujiu slowly looked up from his book to watch them disappear behind the folding screen.

...Now this was a pain.

When Meng Qianshan told him this morning that the prince was spending the night with Madam Gu for his sake, he'd dismissed the eunuch as being out of his mind. But now, watching the Prince of Jing rush home in the middle of the night, Huo Wujiu too couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

The man's unrequited affection for him was one matter, but now he was even going so far as to neglect his first and favored concubine just to sleep on the daybed.

Huo Wujiu frowned, his fingers tapping slowly against the wheelchair.

Was it really because of him?

He'd always disliked being indebted to others, whether materially or emotionally. It irritated him to no end when others imposed unwanted and unappreciated gifts or feelings upon him.

Like, for example, what the Prince of Jing was doing now.

Huo Wujiu dropped his gaze back down to the book in his hands.

The book, penned by a great scholar of the Jing dynasty, was full of moral lessons and lengthy exposition. Huo Wujiu had already found it annoying, and the Prince of Jing's sudden return should have irked him even further.

But as he read the book again, Huo Wujiu found that, for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to frown as much.

It seemed that even this pedantic scholar had become less detestable.

Chapter 20

THE NEXT DAY was another Grand Assembly.

Jiang Suizhou was not looking forward to dealing with the emperor's pompous attitude again, but there was no avoiding it. Despite the slight antipathy that stirred within him, he quickly finished his breakfast and headed out.

The moment he passed through Zhengyang Gate, though, he ran into someone.

“Ah, if it isn't His Highness the Prince of Jing!”

The man who called out to him was wearing the uniform of a fourth-rank military official and looked to be in his thirties or forties. He was tall and dark-skinned, and his thick beard and bulging round eyes put Jiang Suizhou in mind of Zhong Kui.^{[12](#)}

That likeness was only strengthened by the fake smile he was currently forcing onto his face. It distorted his already grim features and failed to mask the man's obvious disdain and hostility.

Jiang Suizhou swiftly glanced at the official's ivory hu.

Ministry of War, Office of Operations, Ji Hongcheng

Realization dawned on Jiang Suizhou.

Ah, it's that guy.

Standing before him was *the* Minister Ji, the court official so notoriously ugly that even mainstream historical records made note of it—

the chronicles of Jing bluntly described him as “ill-favored.” Looking at him now, Jiang Suizhou understood it wasn’t an exaggeration.

In ancient times, the imperial examinations that court officials underwent would take into account the candidate’s physical appearance as well as their score. And as such, had this gentleman relied on simply becoming an official through the exams, he’d never have passed in his lifetime. He clearly owed his current position entirely to his military background and the patronage of Lou Yue, renowned general of Southern Jing.

Jiang Suizhou took a moment to quickly run through the man’s life story in his mind.

Ji Hongcheng’s superior, Lou Yue, was an old friend of Huo Wujiu’s father. When Northern Liang rebelled, Emperor Ling and the current emperor had been so afraid of Lou Yue that they dared not let him face the Liang army. That was just how deep the bonds between Lou Yue and Huo Wujiu’s father ran. Therefore, Ji Hongcheng’s hostility toward him was almost certainly because of Huo Wujiu.

With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou decided to merely cast him a cold glance as he walked past in silence.

But Ji Hongcheng pursued him.

“I’ve often heard of Your Highness’s integrity and virtue. From what I see of you in person now, it seems they were telling the truth,” Ji Hongcheng remarked.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t even bother to turn his head. Ji Hongcheng, however, refused to back down. He continued, his tone dripping with venomous condescension.

“After all, the mark of a true gentleman is in how he flaunts his authority and takes advantage of the disabled and vulnerable in his own courtyard, is it not?”

He’d clearly been bottling this anger in for a long time. He had probably nursed a grudge ever since the last court meeting, lying in wait for the perfect time to deliver his barbed remarks directly.

This man was known for his bravery on the battlefield, but that courage was without strategy. Apparently that held true in his civilian life as well.

Fortunately for all involved, Jiang Suizhou wasn’t the original prince, and he didn’t dare lay a finger on Huo Wujiu. Had that version of the prince heard these words, Huo Wujiu’s life within the Prince of Jing’s residence would only have grown more difficult in response.

Jiang Suizhou turned his head and shot him a cool look.

Ji Hongcheng fearlessly matched it, his large, bell-like eyes ablaze with righteous fury. He seemed to be waiting for Jiang Suizhou to fire back so he could argue.

Finally, Jiang Suizhou smiled faintly.

“Thank you for your concern, Minister Ji, but I don’t think that what happens in my courtyard is any of your business,” he said. “Whether I kill, maim, or mistreat someone... Well, that has nothing to do with you, now does it?”

Ji Hongcheng flushed crimson with rage, frozen and speechless. Pleased at the sight, Jiang Suizhou turned and walked away.

He knew that Ji Hongcheng was only worried about Huo Wujiu. He meant well, but that didn’t make his remarks any less dangerous.

Jiang Suizhou didn't mind being the one to teach him that lesson. Maybe he'd think twice before taking such counterproductive actions in the future.

He arrived at Guangyuan Hall precisely on time. The exterior of the building was solemn and dignified, the quiet atmosphere broken only by the sound of the drum and the voice of the eunuch announcing the assembly.

Inside, the hall was packed with ministers, and yet the dais remained utterly silent.

The emperor had yet to arrive.

Jiang Suizhou looked around to gauge the crowd's reaction, but the other officials seemed accustomed to this. They simply stood there, quietly waiting.

So Jiang Suizhou waited as well.

This wait lasted nearly an hour, until the sun was high in the sky. Jiang Suizhou was starting to feel dizzy from all the standing when the emperor finally sauntered in.

"So early today, my beloved subjects?" Jiang Shunheng asked lazily, slumping against the throne with a yawn.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but notice the dark circles beneath the emperor's eyes, his sallow complexion, his listless demeanor—clear signs of excessive indulgence.

The court ministers dared not speak.

"Have we any important business today, Uncle?" Jiang Shunheng continued.

So, now he was just openly asking Pang Shao this question with no pretense.

Pang Shao stood at the forefront, wearing a faint smile as he began his report. He'd already made his decision on all matters, large and small. As he spoke, the emperor merely nodded along, ordering others to carry out Pang Shao's arrangements.

Even when funds were requested from the Ministry of Revenue, Jiang Shunheng didn't bother to ask how much money was needed. He simply ordered the Minister of Revenue to allocate the funds.

Jiang Suizhou frowned as he listened. He noted the key points while lamenting that the fall of Southern Jing was fully deserved.

Once Pang Shao concluded his report, only a handful of ministers stepped forward with formal memorials to the throne. The emperor listened to their speeches with varying degrees of inattention, then asked Pang Shao what to do. Ultimately, every matter was resolved following Pang Shao's suggestions.

By this point, the emperor seemed to have finally woken up, as he was sitting a little straighter on his throne. Also by this point, however, most business had concluded. Seeing that no one else had anything to report, the emperor immediately leaned back again and gazed at Jiang Suizhou.

"Wudi, I heard a few days ago that you relocated General Huo to your personal courtyard," he said, his tone languid.

Oh boy, here we go again.

Fortunately, Jiang Suizhou had fully expected this line of questioning. He stepped forward and delivered the explanation he'd

prepared in advance.

“I did so because he was causing trouble in my rear courtyard and even injured another concubine. After careful consideration, I decided to keep him under my direct supervision.”

“Mm, of course,” the emperor said, leaning forward with interest. “But I also heard that the man hasn’t left your bedroom even once...”

Jiang Suizhou looked up. The emperor’s beady eyes were positively gleaming, his expression all but broadcasting the thought *So he’s your personal sex slave, then.*

On an individual level, Jiang Suizhou was speechless. However, he obediently played along.

He lowered his head awkwardly and cleared his throat into his fist. This was his tacit confirmation of the emperor’s speculation.

With that, the emperor broke into a wicked smile.

“It appears I made the perfect match,” he said. “Wudi seems very pleased with General Huo!”

Suppressing his revulsion, Jiang Suizhou allowed the flow of conversation to carry him through this wretched encounter.

“That’s not entirely the case,” he explained quickly. “The man is wild and difficult to tame. I’ve merely had to resort to...certain methods, that’s all. I ask for Huangxiong not to mention this again.”

The emperor found his words amusing and burst into hearty laughter.

“All right, all right, I won’t bring up your bedroom affairs anymore.” He continued casually, “However, in half a month, it will be my birthday

banquet. Wudi doesn't have a princess consort, so why not bring your lovely little Madam Huo?"

This again? Really? Jiang Suizhou thought, gritting his teeth.

It seemed that the emperor was determined to drag Huo Wujiu inside the palace at least once. Jiang Suizhou had managed to thwart his efforts before, but how much longer could he continue to do so?

Jiang Suizhou remained silent as he racked his brain for any kind of countermeasure.

Seeing his troubled expression, the emperor assumed it was because he found it shameful, and his enthusiasm grew.

"Wudi, why do you insist on hiding away the gift I gave you?" the emperor said, smiling. "You'll be left sitting all alone at the banquet while everyone else brings their families! Now how would that look?"

Before Jiang Suizhou could speak, the emperor turned to Pang Shao, still smiling.

"Don't you agree, Uncle?"

"His Majesty is entirely correct," Pang Shao replied. "I've heard that the Prince of Jing's two other concubines include one from a brothel and another of common birth. How could they be brought before His Majesty?"

As the two bounced off each other, the pressure mounted, and the emperor's laughter became even more exuberant.

Jiang Suizhou pressed his lips together.

He knew he couldn't avoid this. He paused, then kept his voice low and even as he gave his reply.

"I will obey Huangxiong's orders."

“That’s more like it!” the emperor exclaimed. “Ah, Wudi, I truly can’t understand what it is about men that has you so captivated!”

It was a rhetorical statement; he didn’t expect Jiang Suizhou to respond.

Unfortunately for him, it didn’t matter what he expected. Jiang Suizhou’s simmering anger had reached the point that he did, in fact, decide to respond.

“The wonders, Huangxiong, can only be understood when one tries it oneself,” he remarked casually as he looked up at Jiang Shunheng.

As the emperor heard this, his eyes involuntarily darted first down to Jiang Suizhou, then out to the crowd of men gathered in the court.

They were all older men with faces full of wrinkles. A few particularly egregious examples of the male form stood out among them, such as Ji Hongcheng, whose towering frame and darker skin especially stuck out to the emperor.

Jiang Shunheng seemed to be momentarily speechless, not to mention slightly nauseated.

Since the emperor’s ascension to the throne, his annual birthday celebration had become the most important banquet of the year in Southern Jing. Both the banquet itself and the ceremonies preceding it were conducted with extensive fanfare and the utmost grandeur. As a result, the

Ministry of Rites was bustling with preparations as early as half a month in advance.

After the court meeting, Jiang Suizhou hurried to the Ministry of Rites and didn't return home until nightfall.

Meanwhile, the lights flickered as Huo Wujiu looked down at the envelope on the table in front of him. Earlier that day, someone had delivered an invitation.

It came from the household of an official named Chen Ti. Huo Wujiu had no impression of the man, but it was safe to assume he was probably relatively younger and lower in rank.

The invitation had been sent under the name of Chen Ti's wife, requesting Huo Wujiu's attendance to a flower-viewing banquet at their residence next month.

Moreover, the letter was written in the delicate and graceful hairpin calligraphy script so popular among women lately, and even the paper was infused with a subtle fragrance. Clearly, this correspondence was used for exchanges between upper-class women.

Huo Wujiu wasn't an idiot. He knew that this person was trying to curry favor with others by humiliating him.

It was a malicious act, but they'd performed it in such a way as to maintain plausible deniability. They feigned ignorance of Huo Wujiu's identity and treated him as though he were a cherished concubine in the Prince of Jing's household. By writing him a seemingly heartfelt letter, they made it appear as if they genuinely wished to invite him to enjoy some flowers.

Huo Wujiu understood that, as a prisoner, he should be prepared to endure any humiliation. Even so, as the sickly sweet perfume of the letter lingered in his nose, he couldn't suppress the irritation stirring within him.

At that moment, Sun Yuan came in from outside. Seeing that Meng Qianshan wasn't around, he quickly slipped a bit of paper into Huo Wujiu's hand.

Another letter.

The carefully folded envelope bore no name, but it looked somewhat similar to the one Ji Hongcheng had sent a few days ago.

It'd only been a few days, and he had another secret letter for him already?

Huo Wujiu turned his attention away from the first letter and opened the new one.

A line of hastily scribbled, furious words leaped out at him.

"The Prince of Jing is shameless and disgusting!"

Huo Wujiu paused, and the irritation he'd been holding back inexplicably subsided a little. The corners of his mouth lifted in an almost imperceptible smile as he flipped to the next page.

He had to admit, he was almost looking forward to seeing what dastardly things the despicable Prince of Jing had said in court today.

Chapter 21

JI HONGCHENG HAD CLEARLY intended for Jiang Suizhou to read his letter, judging by his severe tone.

After all, no matter how foolish Ji Hongcheng was, he wouldn't be so stupid as to believe that his letter could reach Huo Wujiu without Jiang Suizhou seeing it.

In the letter, he detailed all of Jiang Suizhou's misdeeds from that morning, from their encounter outside the hall to the outrageous nonsense Jiang Suizhou had spouted in court. Ji Hongcheng went on a written tirade about each and every incident.

Being a military man with little understanding of refinement, he allowed his temper to get the best of him. He'd even included quite a few coarse curses in the letter.

Basically, he was using the letter as an opportunity to curse Jiang Suizhou to his face.

Huo Wujiu read on, and his smirk couldn't help but grow slightly wider.

He'd never imagined that the Prince of Jing, who was so careful and guarded around him and chose his words so cautiously, would act so arrogant behind his back. To think he was audacious enough to deceive the entire court.

So, he claimed that he could do whatever he wanted to the wild Huo Wujiu, did he? Goodness. And what would those "methods" of taming him be?

Huo Wujiu's fingers subconsciously rubbed the edge of the letter.

Suddenly, he very much wanted to see Jiang Suizhou's expression as he bluffed and declared such things.

Behind him, Sun Yuan trembled with fear. He had observed Madam Huo's smile silently growing wider and wider as he read through the letter. The flickering candlelight on his cold, chiseled features carved further threat into his expression and gave him the air of a predator lying in ambush, poised to strike at any moment and tear apart its prey's throat.

Huo Wujiu quickly finished reading the letter, but then he flipped back to the beginning and started on a meticulous second read.

A terrible, icy fear washed over Sun Yuan.

For a moment, he even wondered if he'd delivered to Huo Wujiu a scheme to assassinate the current emperor, or something truly horrible like that. Why else would he be so interested in it?

...Should I inform His Highness? Sun Yuan fretted privately.

At that moment, the candle flame flickered slightly, and faint footsteps could be heard outside the window.

Jiang Suizhou had returned.

Recognizing the faint noise, Sun Yuan rushed forward to remove the lampshade for Huo Wujiu, gesturing for him to hurry and burn the letter.

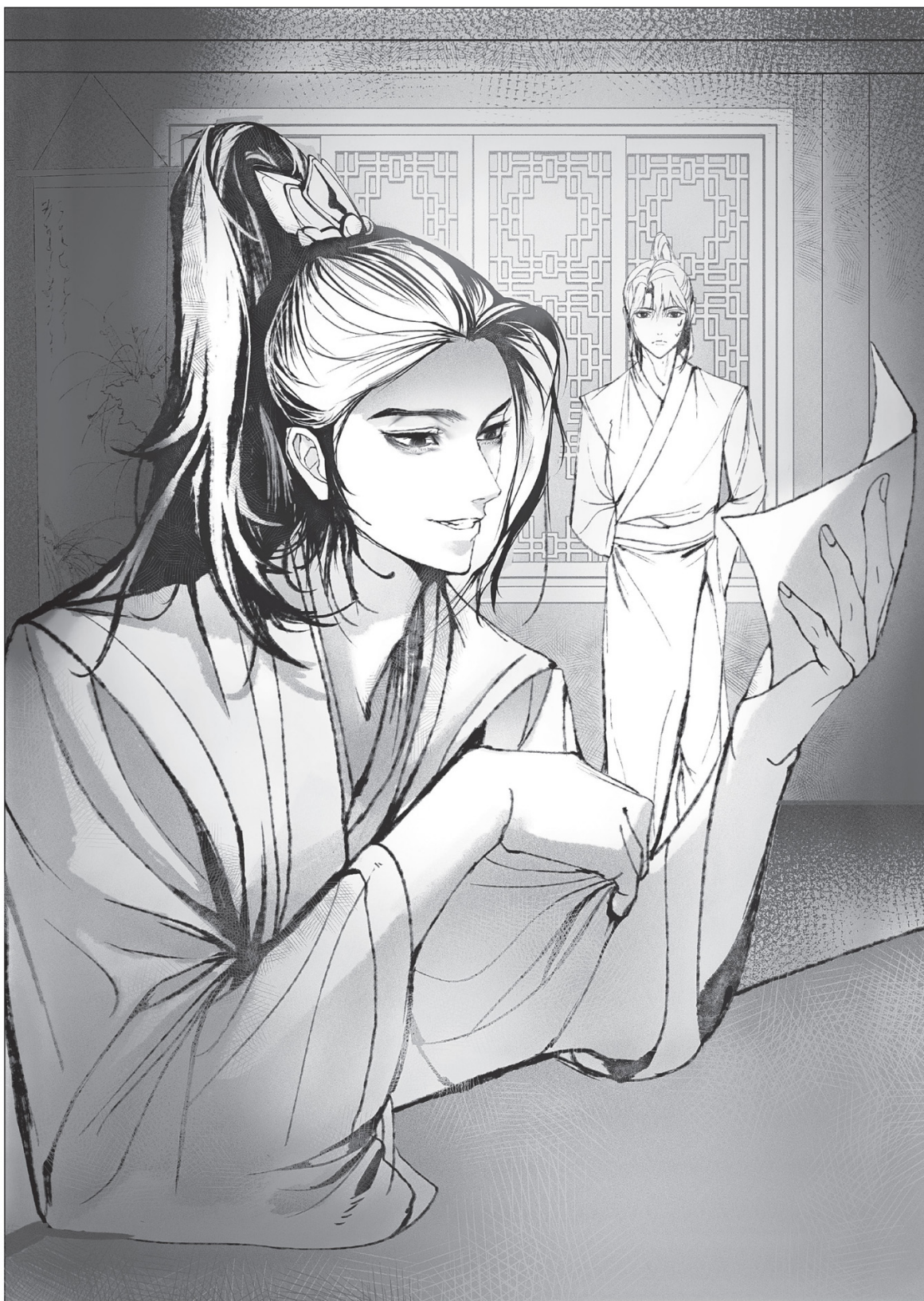
Huo Wujiu brought it to the candle. But just as the flame was about to lick the edge of the paper, he stopped.

Sun Yuan looked at him in surprise.

Huo Wujiu paused for a moment, then refolded the letter and tucked it safely away into his lapels.

Stunned, Sun Yuan continued to stare blankly.

Huo Wujiu looked up at him. His gaze was calm and indifferent, the smile on his lips gone.



“What are you standing there for?” he asked.

His deep, dark eyes seemed as though they could gouge out a person’s heart and pierce right through to its depths. Sun Yuan froze for a brief moment before scrambling to replace the lampshade amid the approaching footsteps.

By the time Jiang Suizhou returned to the residence, it was already late at night.

The morning court assembly had left him exhausted enough already, so after a long, busy day at the Ministry of Rites, he found himself feeling lightheaded.

Fortunately, Ji You was aware of his frail health and didn’t lambaste him for it. He delegated most of Jiang Suizhou’s tasks to his subordinates and allowed him to take things a bit slower.

Ji You’s kindness was the only reason Jiang Suizhou could return to the residence at this hour.

He rode the palanquin back to the courtyard and entered with his head and legs feeling like cotton. His mouth was dry, so he sat down at the table and asked Meng Qianshan to pour him some tea.

Seeing his pale face, Meng Qianshan quickly brought the tea to Jiang Suizhou’s hands and bowed.

“Your Highness, are you all right? Should your servant send for the physician to check your pulse?”

Jiang Suizhou waved his hand, a little breathless.

“No need,” he added in a hoarse voice.

He could tell that his lightheadedness was due to exhaustion. Rather than summoning a doctor to keep him up half the night, it was wiser to simply get some extra rest.

Meng Qianshan reluctantly agreed and stepped aside.

Jiang Suizhou drank a few sips of tea. His thirst quenched, he felt a bit better. He put the cup back on the table and was about to get up to wash when he noticed an envelope on the table.

It was delicate and dainty, like a love letter from a young lady.

“Who sent this letter?” he asked, unable to restrain his curiosity.

Meng Qianshan had brought the letter to Huo Wujiu earlier that day and knew exactly what it was. His answer was swift and direct, as if he had finally found someone to tattle to.

“Your Highness, it was sent by the wife of Minister Chen Ti!”

Chen Ti?

Jiang Suizhou frowned.

Although only a fifth-rank official in the capital, he was a distant relative of Pang Shao. He lacked any notable skills except that of ingratiating himself with Pang Shao. But because of that, he’d flourished within the capital.

Why would his wife have sent a letter here?

“The letter is for Madam Huo,” Meng Qianshan clarified, noticing his silent frown.

Jiang Suizhou looked at Huo Wujiu, who briefly returned his gaze.

“Flower-viewing banquet,” Huo Wujiu said in a low, calm voice.

Flower viewing?

Jiang Suizhou opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. Inside was an invitation asking Huo Wujiu to attend a flower-viewing banquet at Chen Ti’s residence a month later.

Jiang Suizhou’s frown deepened. He didn’t even bother finishing the letter; he just stuffed it back into Meng Qianshan’s hands with the envelope.

Loathsome wretches, all of them.

The steep decline of Southern Jing was largely due to its foolish emperor and swaths of sycophants in the court. They spent their days doing nothing and had no clue how to strengthen the nation against Northern Liang. Instead, they fixated on humiliating prisoners of war, as if that would restore the dignity they’d lost with their defeats.

The emperor was already forcing Jiang Suizhou to bring Huo Wujiu to the palace banquet. And now this complete nobody dared to brazenly join in on the humiliation? After the irritating, exhausting day he’d had, this was the last straw for Jiang Suizhou.

“Send it back wherever it came from,” he said, a hint of fury seeping into his usually well-controlled tone.

Meng Qianshan was startled.

“Your Highness...”

“What?” Jiang Suizhou snapped, sweeping a look at him. “Am I obligated to feign interest in some flowers?”

Meng Qianshan shook his head hard. Although clearly conflicted, he dared not voice it.

At that moment, Huo Wujiu spoke up.

“Pang Shao must have asked him to send this. He won’t give up until he achieves his goal.”

Jiang Suizhou paused in the middle of picking up the teacup and glanced at Huo Wujiu, who now looked fully and directly into his eyes.

“I’m their target. It has nothing to do with you,” Huo Wujiu said.

He understood that this would continue for as long as he remained in Southern Jing. The imperial court was determined to make a spectacle of him, and they were relentless. He’d been fortunate enough to evade their previous attempts, but that was all thanks to the Prince of Jing.

The Prince of Jing had been shielding him, but in doing so, he made himself vulnerable to their manipulation. Each time, these people would seize the chance to take something from him. How much more could the prince afford to lose in his attempts to protect him?

He had no wish to be a coward, nor did he want others to shoulder his burdens for him.

He noticed Jiang Suizhou’s gaze falter slightly in surprise. Huo Wujiu’s heart skipped a beat, and he quickly looked away.

Hopefully the Prince of Jing wouldn’t read too much into his words. He only wished to convey that he didn’t need Jiang Suizhou’s self-sacrificing kindness.

But when Jiang Suizhou spoke next, his hoarse voice had grown much colder.

“Nothing to do with me?” Jiang Suizhou sneered. “You married into my household. How could it have nothing to do with me? Do you think I

would not be humiliated as well, should you attend a women's garden party as a grown man?"

Jiang Suizhou went to his inner chamber to wash up.

As he walked, he grumbled to himself.

If you weren't destined to chop off my head in three years, then I suppose it really wouldn't have anything to do with me!

He was well aware that this petty official had dared to send the letter to his residence because Pang Shao was backing him. And why would Pang Shao back him? Naturally, because doing so would amuse the emperor.

Pang Shao was more than happy to sit back and watch it happen.

Jiang Suizhou had already learned a lot about how to counter these people's schemes during his time here. In any case, he'd continue to thwart everything he could, and when a time came that he couldn't, well...he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

With this in mind, Jiang Suizhou cleaned up and took a nice, relaxing bath.

He'd had an exhausting day, and when he emerged from the inner chamber, his body felt clean but weightless with fatigue. All he wanted was to collapse into bed and sleep.

But when he returned to the bedroom, he saw Huo Wujiu sitting next to the daybed, quietly reading.

...But why?

Baffled, Jiang Suizhou stood frozen in place, his mind going blank.

Huo Wujiu looked up when he heard Jiang Suizhou enter the room. Expressionless, he gestured toward the bed with his chin.

“Sleep there,” he said bluntly, as stern as if he were giving orders to his soldiers.

Jiang Suizhou’s mind had yet to process what was going on. He looked toward the bed.

The bed was neatly made, and on the small table beside it was a pill.

“And take the pill on the table before you do,” Huo Wujiu added.

Chapter 22

JIANG SUIZHOU THOUGHT it was unlikely that Huo Wujiu was trying to poison him.

But...why was he giving him medicine?

He stayed where he was, unmoving as he looked suspiciously at Huo Wujiu.

At that moment, a gentle breeze drifted in through the open window. Warm and refreshing as it was, it stirred the moisture on Jiang Suizhou's body, and he burst into a violent coughing fit.

His immune system had always been weak, and the day's exhaustion had only exacerbated it.

When the coughing subsided, it left his voice hoarse and a faint sheen of tears glimmering in his eyes.

Dazed, he looked over to the window. Through his hazy vision, he realized that someone had already closed it.

Huo Wujiu was sitting by the window, reading. He didn't even look up.

Jiang Suizhou steadied his breaths, then hesitantly made his way to the bed and sat on the edge.

A bed... *His* bed! It was so comfortable!

The mattress was wide, the blankets thick, and the brocade luxuriously heavy and soft. Simply brushing against it made him feel as if it were pulling his very soul deep into its cozy embrace.

It was truly that moving for him, considering he hadn't slept in a proper bed even once since he arrived in this era.

It didn't seem right to take the bed from the disabled man, but on the other hand, Huo Wujiu did offer it to him voluntarily. It wasn't like Jiang Suizhou was bullying him. One night wouldn't hurt...

Jiang Suizhou allowed his intentions of noble refusal to fade, and he pulled back the covers. As he did, his gaze drifted to the small object on the table again.

His eyes lingered there on the pill.

What...exactly was this medicine?

Jiang Suizhou was unsure. He looked at the pill, then over at the silent Huo Wujiu.

He didn't really want to take it, since he didn't even know what it was. But then again, even if Huo Wujiu wanted to poison him, he wouldn't do it this directly.

What if it was a genuine gesture of goodwill? If he didn't take it, would Huo Wujiu be upset?

After weighing his options, Jiang Suizhou decided to trust in Huo Wujiu's upstanding character. He took the pill and lay down on the bed.

So comfortable... Ah, beds! He'd almost forgotten that something so wonderful could even exist.

Jiang Suizhou was already dizzy from exhaustion. The moment he pulled up the covers, he was out like a light.

As he drifted off, he failed to notice that Huo Wujiu had been quietly watching him from where he sat next to the daybed.

Privately, Huo Wujiu noted that although the Prince of Jing may have appeared to be quite astute, he was bold and reckless enough to accept medicine from an enemy. Had he even tried to figure out what it was?

The pill on the table was one that Huo Wujiu had smuggled out of prison—a powerful tonic designed to restore vitality and replenish blood. During his imprisonment, he'd relied on it to cling to life whenever the agony blurred his consciousness. After a month, only a few pills remained, and he'd already used two of them earlier to intimidate Physician Zhou.

Jiang Suizhou was already fast asleep.

...He really was a bit of a fool.

Huo Wujiu reached out and extinguished the candle on the table, plunging the room into tranquil darkness. The silence was broken only by the breeze as it faintly rustled the window paper.

Looking over at the window, he couldn't help but wonder—how could anyone be so delicate? A gust of wind almost too light to feel had been enough to throw that man into a coughing fit until his eyes welled with tears.

And he still insisted on protecting others?

Jiang Suizhou woke up the next day feeling absolutely refreshed. Whether it was the comfort of finally sleeping in a proper bed or the effects of the pill Huo Wujiu had given him, he slept better that night than he ever had before. Even his breathing came easier.

He couldn't enjoy the feeling for too long, though. There was still a mountain of work at the Ministry of Rites that needed to be done.

Jiang Suizhou had studied the rituals of Southern Jing. He knew they were complicated, but he hadn't expected them to be so troublesome in practice.

It was all because of the emperor's extravagance.

In fact, while comparing details and reviewing documents these past few days, Jiang Suizhou had obtained records of the emperor's birthday banquets over the previous two years.

The first year of his reign was a time of turmoil and empty coffers. The previous emperor had died less than a year prior, and the palace in Lin'an was only half built. Yet even then, the current emperor made his own birthday banquet a priority. It had been ostentatious beyond measure and twice as lavish as the previous emperor's.

In the following two years, as Southern Jing settled in Lin'an, the scale of the banquets grew even larger. By this point, the Ministry of Rites was overwhelmed just trying to organize them.

In such a situation, there was only so much leeway Ji You could grant Jiang Suizhou. He was grateful that he could at least return to the residence on time and not labor into the wee hours, but he was still exhausted. Every night he came home feeling lightheaded and dizzy, as though he might collapse at any moment.

However, he slept well every night.

It seemed as if Huo Wujiu had forgotten that the bed was his territory. Each night, as Jiang Suizhou prepared to rest, Huo Wujiu would claim the

daybed, leaving Jiang Suizhou with no choice but to sleep in the full-sized bed.

Every day, Jiang Suizhou considered reminding Huo Wujiu to switch back, but the exhaustion always got the better of him, and the bed was so comfortable that he kept putting it off.

Because of this, no matter how badly the day wore him down, Jiang Suizhou slept soundly every night and woke up feeling at least somewhat rejuvenated, instead of being entirely drained.

Huo Wujiu deserved a good amount of credit for this, and as a result, Jiang Suizhou found that his view of Huo Wujiu was improving with each passing day.

In this way, a delicate equilibrium had formed between the two.

They still communicated very little, but sharing the same courtyard meant they had two meals together each day. After dining, if the evening was still young, they would retreat to opposite corners of the bedroom and go about their separate business.

Things were rather peaceful.

And then the fifteenth of the month rolled around.

Despite his busy schedule, Jiang Suizhou had not forgotten the account book he'd found in the study.

Early in the morning on the fifteenth, after finishing his breakfast, he called Meng Qianshan aside.

“Have you brought back this month’s account book?”

It was a vague but leading question, and sure enough, Meng Qianshan didn’t suspect anything at all. At the inquiry, he quickly pulled

out a thin piece of paper from his lapels.

“It was delivered last night. I’d planned to give it to Your Highness after you finished your work today,” he said with a smile.

Jiang Suizhou opened it to find a meticulously kept record of the last month’s daily living expenses for a family of two. Since the two people in question rarely left their home, their expenditures were minimal, amounting to only a modest sum by the month’s end.

“The expenses seem a little lower this month,” Jiang Suizhou probed cautiously, casting a glance at Meng Qianshan.

“Indeed!” Meng Qianshan affirmed quickly. “The young lady spends little, and the old lady’s cold has improved, so there’s no need to purchase medicine anymore.”

Jiang Suizhou paused briefly, then continued to dig for a bit more information.

“That’s good. If expenses do come up, don’t skimp. Those two are important. We must take good care of them.”

Meng Qianshan took the bait. He gave a foolish smile and nodded hard.

“Rest assured, Your Highness! Your servant understands! I will ensure that Madam Gu’s family is well cared for without the slightest mishap!”

Jiang Suizhou froze.

...Madam Gu?

So the original prince was holding Gu Changyun’s family hostage in that residence? Jiang Suizhou knew something was up, but he never

expected that the prince would resort to this to ensure his concubine's loyalty.

No wonder those expenses lacked any travel costs, yet there was a large sum being spent on hiring guards.

It also explained Gu Changyun's behavior the other night. Despite Jiang Suizhou failing his little test, Gu Changyun showed no aversion toward him, as though he shared no master-servant bond with the original Prince of Jing at all.

Jiang Suizhou put away the bill.

"As long as you understand," he said with a faint nod.

He had more or less pieced together Gu Changyun's background. Now the next question was how the original prince brought Xu Du into his fold.

Perhaps the other recurring financial transaction on the fifteenth had something to do with that as well. Regardless, that payment was one he would have to make in person, and that visit might enable him to glean some clues about Xu Du's background.

He would need to visit Xu Du's courtyard this evening, but first he had to go do his job at the Ministry of Rites.

Jiang Suizhou walked out of the courtyard and boarded the palanquin waiting outside, still pondering and planning.

The Ministry of Rites had an endless supply of miscellaneous tasks waiting for him, and he now possessed crucial information about his advisors. With his mind so preoccupied, he completely forgot to inform Meng Qianshan that he wouldn't be returning to the courtyard for dinner that evening.

Chapter 23

NIGHT FELL AS JIANG SUIZHOU made his way to Xu Du's courtyard.

The Ministry of Rites had been so swamped with work that he wasn't able to return to the residence until after it was completely dark. However, he hadn't forgotten about Xu Du.

Gu Changyun wasn't there; Jiang Suizhou hadn't informed either of them in advance precisely for this reason. There were certain matters that he had to discuss with Xu Du in private.

Jiang Suizhou arrived just as Xu Du was sitting down for dinner. Xu Du maintained his composure and simply had his maids bring another bowl and set of chopsticks, then dismissed them.

They were alone now, and Jiang Suizhou noted how serene and tranquil Xu Du's residence felt. The room smelled faintly of ink, and just outside the window, he could see the shadows of bamboo swaying gently in the breeze. On the table beneath it sat a weiqi board, its pieces arranged in an unfinished game.

Jiang Suizhou sat down at the table and looked at Xu Du, who smiled politely back at him.

"To think His Highness knew that there are matters to discuss on the fifteenth of every month," he said. "This subordinate of yours is not as clever as Changyun. I was pondering how I was supposed to meet His Highness, if you were unaware."

Xu Du spoke frankly, immediately tossing aside all pretense. They both knew Jiang Suizhou wasn't the original Prince of Jing, so what was the

point in putting on an act?

And so, Jiang Suizhou didn't beat around the bush either. After all, they were completely alone in the room, and there were no recording devices in ancient times.

"The study holds many books. In my research, I found some clues which led me to suspect I had business to discuss with you today."

Xu Du was stunned. It seemed he hadn't expected him to be so straightforward.

"Since childhood, your subordinate has only encountered tales of possession in storybooks. I never imagined that one day I would see such speculation prove to be true," he said slowly.

"I didn't want to do it either," Jiang Suizhou said, smiling a bit grimly. "It was a coincidence, and I assure you, I had no choice in the matter."

Xu Du laughed.

"How fascinating. Witnessing such an extraordinary phenomenon makes my time in this world worthwhile," he said.

Jiang Suizhou paused to observe him for a moment. He seemed remarkably composed and at ease.

"So, I must admit," Jiang Suizhou continued, "even now, I still have no idea what you're after."

"His Highness says I'm after something? In what sense?"

"You know that I'm not the Prince of Jing, but someone else who became him," Jiang Suizhou began. "And now I know that the original prince has been holding Gu Changyun's family hostage to coerce him into

service. But what about you? You must have your own reasons for being here.”

Slight surprise tinged Xu Du’s placid expression.

“You discovered even this, Your Highness?” he asked.

Jiang Suizhou looked at him quietly.

After a moment, Xu Du smiled and nodded.

“Those are indeed Changyun’s circumstances,” he confirmed. “His parents passed away when he was young, leaving him, his grandmother, and his younger sister to rely on each other for survival. His Highness eventually took an interest in him, but he was unwilling to involve himself in court disputes, so you resorted to certain means. I must admit, I never expected His Highness to be sharp enough to uncover this.”

“What about you?” Jiang Suizhou asked.

Xu Du paused and looked up at him, his eyes clear.

“Your subordinate comes from a merchant family, with no way to enter officialdom,” he said. “But I am determined to serve the state. My life’s ambition is simply to achieve fame and fortune.”

Jiang Suizhou was aware that the imperial examination system in the Jing dynasty was still relatively new, and the criteria for candidates’ family backgrounds were exceedingly stringent. If anyone within the past five generations had been a merchant, actor, or prostitute, the candidate was barred from taking the exam.

“So, you joined the Prince of Jing’s faction?” he asked.

Xu Du laughed.

“I’m a nobody. This was the only path I could find for myself, walking alongside the struggling Prince of Jing,” he said. “Moreover, although I seek fame and fortune, I’m not unscrupulous. Joining Pang Shao’s faction would require me to commit actions that would be condemned for generations to come.”

Seeing his honest demeanor and hearing his insightful words, Jiang Suizhou found himself about 80 percent convinced of Xu Du’s trustworthiness.

He pondered for a moment.

“The money you receive on the fifteenth of every month,” he said. “What is that used for?”

Ultimately, the most important indicator of a person’s character was found in how well their actions backed up their words.

By assessing his handling of these critical matters, he could more easily judge whether Xu Du was truly being honest with him.

He watched Xu Du as he turned around to retrieve an account book from a concealed compartment in the bookshelf, then returned to the table and handed it to Jiang Suizhou.

“Your Highness has been saving money over the years to cultivate a group of elite guards,” he said. “Not too many; just around ten in total. Such guards are loyal to their death and require years of personal training to ensure their reliability. Therefore, His Highness sought me out and entrusted me with the task of training them.”

Jiang Suizhou was somewhat surprised, but he didn’t show it on his face. He took the account book and examined it carefully.

The identification number and expenses for each elite guard had been meticulously recorded, along with corresponding dates. A month's worth of transactions were enough to fill a detailed and weighty volume.

"So... Basically, every month you head out for leisure and purchase some stationery, but I never ask you to report it?"

Xu Du smiled and nodded.

"His Highness is indeed wise."

Jiang Suizhou quietly read through the account book, while Xu Du waited patiently at his side. After a long time, Jiang Suizhou put down the records, took out the money he had prepared earlier, and held it out to Xu Du according to the sums delineated in the book.

This was a way of showing, through his actions, that he trusted him.

Xu Du reached out to take the banknotes.

"You've done excellently," Jiang Suizhou said. "I'm sure I'll need to rely on you again in the future."

"His Highness only needs to give the order," Xu Du said, smiling faintly.

Jiang Suizhou paused.

"But speaking of which," he said, watching him carefully, "have you thought about the future at all?"

Xu Du didn't answer. He just tilted his head to indicate that Jiang Suizhou should continue.

"Dynasties rise and fall, you know. They have lifespans just like individual people," he remarked, choosing his words slowly and carefully. "Should you find yourself looking up at the dawn of a new regime from the

rubble of the old one, what will you do? How will you pursue the fame and fortune you seek?”

Xu Du was silent for a long time after hearing this. Then suddenly, he laughed. The sound was clear and pure.

“Everyone believes that the division of the north and south is an immutable reality, destined to last for centuries. Even if Northern Liang still had Huo Wujiu, this would not change. What makes His Highness believe that Southern Jing has reached the end of its lifespan?”

“Why was Huo Wujiu captured?” Jiang Suizhou countered.

“He led his troops deep into enemy territory, cutting himself off from any reinforcements.”

“And what are your thoughts about the current court of Southern Jing?”

Xu Du paused.

“His Highness is saying that General Huo’s defeat was but a misstep,” he said with a small smile, “and in the end, Jing’s downfall stems from its rotten foundations?”

Jiang Suizhou didn’t speak. This was a tacit agreement.

They stared at each other in silence for a long moment, then Xu Du stood up and bowed deeply to Jiang Suizhou.

“I never had any hope for that kind of predicament,” he said. “I sought to take things one step at a time, only making my moves when my hand was forced. But now, it seems I’ve been fortunate enough to meet a wise master. I believe that His Highness already has plans for the future, so I intend to follow your orders faithfully and serve as your right hand.”

Jiang Suizhou was honestly speechless.

On the one hand, he was glad that Xu Du had opened up and was willing to trust him. But on the other, Jiang Suizhou felt uneasy receiving such high praise.

What plans did Xu Du think he had for the future?

He had no plans. All he had was the knowledge that in the near future, Huo Wujiu would wipe them all out.

Anyin Hall was quiet.

It was past dinnertime, but their lord had yet to return.

Meng Qianshan was so anxious that he kept pacing, and with each turn he made, he would sneak a glance at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu sat quietly at the table, reading a book. Perhaps Meng Qianshan was imagining things, but he couldn't help but feel that it'd been almost an hour since Huo Wujiu had turned the page.

Meng Qianshan had already sent someone to inquire.

A moment later, a servant came running back. He dashed into the main room, panting as he stood in front of Meng Qianshan.

“Reporting to Qianshan-gonggong. His Highness has gone to Madam Xu's courtyard,” he reported. “The maid from Madam Xu's courtyard said His Highness didn't inform them in advance either. He went right there after returning to the residence.”

Oh no! Meng Qianshan glanced at Madam Huo. What should he do now? The servant had delivered this report right in front of him, so now Meng Qianshan couldn't even make up a lie to placate him.

He quickly waved his hand to dismiss the servant.

After the servant left, Meng Qianshan put on his most ingratiating smile and walked over to Huo Wujiu's side.

"Why are you so clueless?" he told the nearby maid. "Hurry up and take the food to be reheated. It's gone cold, so..."

He trailed off, for Madam Huo had put down his book and picked up his chopsticks. Without looking up, he took a bite of the cold vegetables.

He began to eat alone.

Meng Qianshan suddenly had a strange thought.

It was as if...the servants in the room weren't the only ones waiting for His Highness to return for dinner. As if even Madam Huo, who usually paid him little attention, was also waiting to share the meal with him.

Madam Huo was clearly not in a good mood right now.

The air around Madam Huo was so heavy and the mood so dark that none of the servants could handle it. Meng Qianshan bravely stepped up and attended to Huo Wujiu himself as he finished his meal.

Frightened and anxious, they could only wait for His Highness to return after dinner and personally appease this great beast he'd angered.

Thus the evening stretched on, the meal ended...and His Highness had yet to return.

It wasn't until much later that the maid from Madam Xu's courtyard arrived bearing an unfortunate message.

“His Highness will be staying at Madam Xu’s place tonight.”

Chapter 24

JIANG SUIZHOU WAS SIMPLY too fatigued to make his way home that night.

After running himself ragged at the Ministry of Rites earlier, he'd barely had the energy for that minefield of a conversation with Xu Du. On top of that, he'd only managed to eat a few bites of dinner before the servants returned to clear the table.

When Jiang Suizhou stood up to leave, a sudden wave of dizziness overcame him and he almost collapsed.

Xu Du hurried forward to support him.

"Your Highness is of frail health. You must not overwork yourself."

Jiang Suizhou steadied himself and took a few breaths to pull himself together. He leaned on the table with one hand and feebly waved Xu Du off.

"The emperor's birthday banquet is coming. The Ministry of Rites has been busy every single day."

Xu Du helped him over to a nearby daybed.

"Yes, the court is always extremely busy this time of the year," he said as he lit some incense. "Should I send for the physician?"

Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

"No need," he said. "It's too much trouble."

"Then I'll have someone prepare a calming soup for Your Highness," Xu Du replied, nodding. "Why don't you stay here tonight?"

The suggestion made sense. After all, the rear courtyard was far from Anyin Hall and separated by a large garden. Jiang Suizhou had to take a palanquin everywhere, but it couldn't go through the garden and required a detour.

Just enduring the bumpy ride in the chilly nighttime breeze would be exhausting for him in this condition.

It was a tempting offer, but...

"Do you have an extra bed in your quarters?" he asked doubtfully.

"Rest assured, Your Highness. There's a veiled partition in the inner room," Xu Du answered lightly. "Changyun sleeps behind it when he stays over."

Jiang Suizhou nodded in relief and finally allowed himself to give in. As long as he had his own bed to lie on, did it really matter where it was?

So, that night, he stayed in Xu Du's quarters.

However, Jiang Suizhou didn't sleep well that night.

Perhaps it was the muted but persistent scent of ink that pervaded the room, or perhaps Xu Du's bed was a little too hard. In any case, Jiang Suizhou felt like something was missing.

He drifted in and out of sleep all night. When he woke up early the next morning, his mind was foggy and slow, and his eyes were ringed with dark circles. As he stepped out of bed, his legs felt soft and heavy.

There would be another Grand Assembly that day.

He couldn't help but regret his decision. If only he hadn't taken the lazy way out last night and returned to his own room to sleep, things would have been so much better.

Meng Qianshan was already waiting in the courtyard of Anyin Hall early in the morning. He had not sent over Jiang Suizhou's court robes, seeing as he would have to pass by Anyin Hall on his way from Xu Du's quarters anyway.

Jiang Suizhou had a quick breakfast at Xu Du's place before heading straight back home to get ready for the assembly.

As he crossed the threshold of Anyin Hall, he saw a tall, straight figure sitting at the table, bathed in soft morning light. His elongated shadow stretched across the room to intersect the ink bamboo painting that hung on the opposite wall, as if it were a sharp blade slicing deep into the heart of the bamboo grove.

It was Huo Wujiu eating breakfast alone.

He completely ignored Jiang Suizhou and kept his back pencil-straight as he sat in silence. This cold shoulder was all too familiar, enough to even feel somewhat comforting. Some of the frustration borne from his sleepless night dissipated.

Jiang Suizhou didn't rebuke Huo Wujiu, nor did he go out of his way to greet him. Instead, he acted as if he didn't see the man. With Meng Qianshan's support, he walked around Huo Wujiu, heading to the inner chamber to change his robes.

Meng Qianshan grumbled the entire time.

"Your Highness, did Madam Xu take good care of you last night? Your servant noticed that Your Highness doesn't look well..."

Jiang Suizhou interrupted him.

“Enough,” he said.

Meng Qianshan fell silent. Jiang Suizhou hesitated, then put forth a request.

“The window paper in Xu Du’s room looks a bit worn. Have someone inspect it later, and replace anything else that needs refreshing as well.”

The window paper was indeed in poor condition, allowing drafts to seep in all night. While others might not have noticed, Jiang Suizhou had suffered greatly and woken up with a stuffy nose.

Meng Qianshan responded with a flurry of affirmations.

As they spoke, they went into the inner chamber. Jiang Suizhou didn’t notice that the moment he walked around the screen, Huo Wujiu looked up and frowned at his retreating figure.

The prince’s steps were unsteady, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He was clearly exhausted.

Huo Wujiu had never seen him look so tired, even after sleeping on the daybed.

What could have drained so much of his energy in a single night?

For some reason, Huo Wujiu found the chopsticks in his hand awkward, and he struggled to pick up his food.

He tried to focus his attention on the simple act of eating, but it was futile.

Huo Wujiu tightened his grip on the chopsticks and tried again, applying more force, but Jiang Suizhou’s appearance from a moment earlier

continued to haunt him. Though he'd only caught a brief glimpse, it was etched vividly in his memory. It took hold of his mind's eye and forced him to speculate on what Jiang Suizhou had been up to the previous night.

Looking down at the table, Huo Wujiu realized that the braised beef shank had been pulverized into mush, gristle and all, after only a few attempts. It was as if the edges of his chopsticks had been sharpened.

He tried one more time, but he still couldn't manage to pick it up.

Annoyed, he placed the chopsticks down on the table.

It must have been because he hadn't slept well last night, putting him in a foul mood and leaving him prone to nonsensical thoughts.

After all, he'd never suffered from insomnia before, even out in the howling sandstorms of Yangguan or the bone-chilling cold of the northern frontier.

But here in these lavish quarters, he'd struggled to fall asleep last night, just because a certain person had been missing.

Seriously, how could someone that frail have the energy to fool around in his concubine's quarters instead of returning to his own to rest? He was left panting after taking a few steps, let alone...anything else.

And yet he still had the nerve to claim he cared for Huo Wujiu so deeply that he couldn't bring himself to do anything to him? But he had no qualms about brazenly and openly *spending the night* with the others in the rear courtyard. He was even considerate enough to replace their window paper afterward.

This was all his fault. He had a silver tongue that spouted only nonsense!

Truly, the Prince of Jing was not a virtuous man.

Jiang Suizhou changed into his court robes early in the morning and left in a hurry.

Court officials were not allowed to bring attendants into the palace. Meng Qianshan escorted Jiang Suizhou out of the residence and then returned to Anyin Hall to serve the expressionless “favored concubine” who remained in the quarters alone.

Usually, this lord of his was quiet and insisted on doing everything himself, so he was easy to serve. But today, Meng Qianshan felt that something was amiss. He couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was, though.

Madam Huo usually disliked talking, so his silence was not unusual. Normally, he preferred to sit in a corner and read, and today was no different. Everything was the same as usual.

And yet, somehow, the atmosphere in the room felt particularly oppressive today.

It left Meng Qianshan feeling trapped and stifled, like he could barely breathe. He was like a fly buzzing around a room, unable to find its way out.

After much deliberation, Meng Qianshan came up with an idea. Though Madam Huo held neither His Highness nor his trusted eunuch in high regard, he didn’t seem particularly aggressive today. Thus, he

wondered if the mistress might be receptive to an attempt to lift his spirits a bit. It wouldn't do any harm to try, at least.

With this in mind, Meng Qianshan cautiously approached Huo Wujiu and leaned in.

“Mistress, the weather is wonderful today. Why don't I accompany you for a stroll in the garden?”

Hearing this, Sun Yuan looked outside from where he was serving at Huo Wujiu's side, only to see a dull gray sky.

Lin'an saw plenty of spring rain, and these past few days had been overcast. Where was this so-called wonderful weather?

Huo Wujiu continued reading his book in silence.

Meng Qianshan had gained enough experience dealing with Huo Wujiu to know he could take this as a “yes,” if he so desired. If Huo Wujiu didn't explicitly refuse, it meant he was generally ambivalent.

As if he had received an imperial edict, Meng Qianshan quelled his inner joy to cast a glare at Sun Yuan.

“The mistress wishes to stroll in the garden. Why are you moving so slowly?”

Sun Yuan quickly pushed the wheelchair and followed Meng Qianshan out of the courtyard.

The Prince of Jing's residence was meticulously arranged thanks to its original owner, who was a wealthy and very particular man. He'd created eighteen scenic spots in the garden, each with its own unique theme.

Anyin Hall was located in the best spot, of course, and it served as an ideal starting point for a stroll. After leaving the courtyard and turning

south, they entered the residence's forested garden.

Meng Qianshan had served here for three years and could navigate the garden with his eyes closed. Eager to please Huo Wujiu, he enthusiastically and vividly explained each scenic spot as they passed by.

However, Huo Wujiu didn't seem interested. He sat in the wheelchair, completely unresponsive, as if he couldn't hear Meng Qianshan at all.

It was Sun Yuan who listened with great interest, eagerly looking wherever Meng Qianshan pointed. Sometimes he couldn't help but marvel out loud at the beautiful landscape, which earned him a withering glare from Meng Qianshan.

But the boy was naturally thick-skinned and remained oblivious to Meng Qianshan's displeasure. He simply enjoyed the scenery with genuine delight.

They strolled slowly through the garden. Eventually, they stepped onto a stone bridge leading to a bamboo grove.

"Look, Madam, this area here is called 'Listening to the Spring in the Secluded Grove'! But it's not just any bamboo grove," Meng Qianshan explained excitedly. "Once we cross the bridge, you'll see..."

Suddenly, the enthusiasm drained from his voice and he trailed off.

Puzzled, Sun Yuan quickly followed his gaze.

Within the bamboo grove flowed a bubbling stream, and a winding path led into its depths. Beneath a hundred green bamboo stalks stood an open-air game table, exquisitely carved from stone.

At this moment, two people were sitting on the weiqi-playing platform, engaged in a match. One was dressed in red and the other in

green.

Meng Qianshan inwardly cried for his ancestors. He wanted to slap himself. Stopping abruptly in his tracks, he grabbed Sun Yuan's shoulder and forced him to turn around on the narrow stone bridge.

"Ah, your servant misremembered! It actually *is* just an average bamboo grove! Nothing worth seeing, and look, it's a dead end ahead, so let's turn around and head to the next spot..."

Just then, the great dormant beast in the wheelchair spoke up.

"We've only just gotten to the 'listening to the spring' part," he said. "Why turn back? Keep going."

His voice seemed cold and forced through gritted teeth.

Meng Qianshan almost fell to his knees in despair.

So you've been listening after all! You've just been disregarding me this whole time!

He quickly bowed, preparing himself to persuade the mistress to cease "listening to the spring," but then he caught sight of Huo Wujiu's grim expression in profile.

Those icy, pitch-black eyes no longer held the complete indifference they'd had a minute ago. They were sharp and hawklike, staring straight ahead.

For a moment, Meng Qianshan was compelled to envision this man standing on a battlefield with thousands of troops at his back. His eyes blazed with a terrifying intensity, as if he were ready to behead the enemy commander himself.

Meng Qianshan followed his gaze.

The great and terrible war god was looking at Xu Du.

Chapter 25

THOUGH MENG QIANSHAN desperately wanted to cry out in warning, he dared not disobey Madam Huo. He nervously pushed the wheelchair forward, with Sun Yuan on his heels.

Madam Xu, run! Meng Qianshan thought as hard as he could.

Unfortunately, it seemed neither madam received the telepathic signal he sent. Hearing the sound of the wheelchair, the two men looked up, their expressions calm as they waited for them to approach.

Huo Wujiu coldly scanned both concubines before him.

He had some impression of the one in red—handsy, with an effeminate appearance. During their first meeting, he'd even reached out to touch his face.

His gaze turned colder when it landed on the second man.

Wasn't he the one who'd mediated last time? When Huo Wujiu had twisted the red-clad man's wrist, the other one had placidly stepped forward to intervene before sending someone to fetch the doctor.

...So this was the Prince of Jing's type?

Huo Wujiu withdrew his gaze, a hint of disapproving disdain in his eyes.

With his extensive military background, Huo Wujiu had little patience for these indecisive scholarly types. Most soldiers despised such wishy-washy, peacemaking cowards. Just listening to them speak was enough to give him a headache. Then again, what did he expect from the

Prince of Jing? Of course a man of such poor character had even worse taste in men. How utterly unsurprising that he only liked good-for-nothings.

Consumed with his internal barrage of criticisms, Huo Wujiu failed to realize that he had also unwittingly included himself on that list, as a man whom the Prince of Jing had allegedly “admired for years.”

He glanced at the men once, then withdrew his gaze, his expression cold and aloof. He had no intention of greeting either of them.

However, the smiling Gu Changyun decided to break the ice.

“It’s been a while since we last saw our Madam Huo, hasn’t it?” he said, his fox-like eyes soft as silk as he looked Huo Wujiu up and down thoroughly. “The feng shui of the Prince of Jing’s residence is truly rejuvenating. Just look at Madam Huo—his complexion has improved remarkably.”

Xu Du shot a look at Gu Changyun. He knew that before his family’s downfall, Gu Changyun’s father had had multiple concubines. As someone raised in such an environment, he was well-versed in the schemes and intrigues of the rear courtyard. After arriving at the Prince of Jing’s residence, he took particular pleasure in performing this bitter act before outsiders.

Usually, Xu Du didn’t engage in such performances, and he figured Huo Wujiu wouldn’t either.

Sure enough, Huo Wujiu remained silent, while Meng Qianshan bowed politely behind him.

“Of course! Since Madam Huo arrived at the residence, everything has been going well,” said Meng Qianshan cheerily. “Thank you for your concern, Madam Gu!”

He turned slightly and subtly elbowed Sun Yuan before continuing with a smile.

“We didn’t know the two madams were playing a game here. This servant has foolishly disturbed your leisure... Sun Yuan, why aren’t you bidding farewell to the two madams?”

Sun Yuan quickly obeyed and bowed to them as ordered.

However, before he could finish his farewell, Gu Changyun interrupted.

“What’s the rush?” he asked, his tone relaxed and playful. “You just arrived, and now you’re leaving. Meng Qianshan, do I look like a man-eating tiger to you?”

Xu Du glanced at him.

He had advised Gu Changyun many times not to stir up trouble, but he also knew that the strife in Gu Changyun’s formative years had culminated in a stubborn and fearless mischievous streak that resisted all logic.

Noting Meng Qianshan’s awkward, forced smile, Xu Du stepped in to smooth things over.

“Unless there’s some urgent matter, there’s no need to rush off. Does Madam Huo know how to play weiqi?” he asked lightly, turning to Huo Wujiu. “Changyun and I were just in the middle of a game. If you’re familiar with it, perhaps you could take a look and advise us on how to break this stalemate?”

Huo Wujiu glanced at him impassively.

He hated weiqi.

His father was a terrible player, but his military advisor happened to be a national master. Because they were stationed in Yangguan, his father wouldn't let any opportunity to educate him go to waste. Because of this, Huo Wujiu had been forced to learn weiqi strategies from that sly, smiling advisor.

Huo Wujiu found the black and white pieces boring and frequently made mischief instead. His father had been so infuriated that he'd confiscated his favorite Ferghana horse, using that as leverage to force him to learn.

So learn he did, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it.

Huo Wujiu coldly scanned Xu Du in front of him.

An indecisive peacemaker, a tedious board game... At last, the things that annoyed him the most had all come together as one.

At Xu Du's invitation, Sun Yuan seemed conflicted. He looked left and right, unsure whom to listen to. But Huo Wujiu raised his hand, signaling him to stay put.

Sun Yuan stepped back obediently. Huo Wujiu gripped the wooden wheels of his wheelchair and moved himself over to the board.

Xu Du watched Huo Wujiu calmly look over the game, then reach out in one decisive movement. He picked up a black piece and placed it on the board.

Xu Du gazed down at it, stunned.

But Huo Wujiu didn't give him a chance to speak. After setting down the piece, he pulled back his hand and placed it on the wooden wheel. With a firm push, he swiftly wheeled himself away.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Sun Yuan hurriedly stepped forward to push him, and Meng Qianshan hastily bowed to the two before following.

Gu Changyun watched until they disappeared into the distance. Then he turned to Xu Du with an expression of astonishment.

“Just look at that—he’s truly a general through and through,” Gu Changyun remarked. “Even when confined to the rear courtyard, he remains wild and unruly, with no regard for anyone.”

When Xu Du offered no response, Gu Changyun turned to look at him. Xu Du was staring intently at the weiqi board, expressionless and silent. Gu Changyun followed his gaze and chuckled.

“What’s so interesting about the board?” he teased. “It’s just—”

He stopped speaking abruptly.

On the chessboard, Xu Du’s white pieces had nearly driven Gu Changyun’s black pieces into a corner. But in a single move, Huo Wujiu had transformed the situation entirely. Now the black pieces had become cornered beasts, poised to launch a counterattack. They had risen from certain defeat to sink their teeth into the enemy’s throat, and their momentum would soon prove overwhelming.

Gu Changyun analyzed the board in awe for a moment. Then he laughed.

“He’s quite good at weiqi, isn’t he?” he said.

But Xu Du shook his head. That was irrelevant to what had shaken him so badly.

Just now, when Huo Wujiu placed that piece and withdrew his hand, he'd glanced up at him. It was brief, but it was enough to chill Xu Du to the bone. There was something terrible and ruthless behind those fierce, dark eyes.

When he met Huo Wujiu's gaze, a shiver ran down his spine. Somehow, he had the distinct impression that Huo Wujiu wanted to annihilate more than just the white pieces on the board.

After a moment, he smiled and shook his head again, as if to clear it.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Gu Changyun.

"Nothing," Xu Du replied. "I just wonder... When did I offend General Huo?"

By noon, a light drizzle began to fall.

With dark circles beneath his eyes, Jiang Suizhou drifted listlessly through morning court, then dragged himself off to the Ministry of Rites.

Ji You had been highly mindful of his condition, but he couldn't neglect to assign him any tasks at all. Seeing Jiang Suizhou's pale complexion, Ji You glanced at the sky. Noting that it was still fairly early, he dispatched Jiang Suizhou to the city outskirts to collect a batch of materials for the venue setup.

With a smile, he'd informed Jiang Suizhou that once the inventory was verified against the account book, there was no need for him to return

to the Ministry of Rites. Instead, he could simply have the materials sent directly to the ministry's courtyard.

Jiang Suizhou knew Ji You was letting him off easy on purpose. This way, he could return home early after completing his duties.

Ji You was a good man, and Jiang Suizhou was deeply grateful for his kind and gentle nature. He was thankful he'd opened his mouth that day and chatted with him a little longer.

Unfortunately, however, the moment he left the Ministry of Rites, the rain began to pour.

He'd just left the north gate when he received word that the carriage carrying the materials had gotten stuck in the mud three miles outside the city.

This meant another heap of troubles.

The rain beyond the city fell harder than within, and the roads outside Lin'an were little more than dirt paths. After the emperor's move, he'd poured all his resources into constructing his palace and neglected to fix up the roads.

Thus, the materials that should have arrived sometime in the afternoon would barely reach the city gates by dusk.

Jiang Suizhou had been standing in the cold, wet wind all day. When the carriage finally arrived, he had to direct his subordinates to count the items and clean off the mud.

By the time he returned to the residence, it was already past nine in the evening.

While outside the city, he'd eaten something to tide him over, taking that as his dinner. By the time he returned, he was so exhausted he could barely keep his eyes open. After a quick wash, he went straight to bed.

Meng Qianshan carefully helped Jiang Suizhou lie down, then glanced to the side.

By the window, Madam Huo sat in his wheelchair, quietly flipping through a book.

Meng Qianshan vaguely remembered that Madam Huo usually didn't stay up this late. Had he been waiting for His Highness to return? Or perhaps he just found the book particularly interesting.

Meng Qianshan didn't dare ask and quietly left the room.

The door slid shut.

Huo Wujiu turned to the next page of the book.

In the book, a poor scholar climbed over the wall of the prime minister's residence. There he secretly met with the prime minister's beautiful daughter under the moonlight. She shyly offered him a handkerchief she'd embroidered herself, but the scholar grabbed her soft hand...

Huo Wujiu's eyes were on the book, but his gaze was empty.

He'd flipped through half the book without even noticing what it was about.

After a moment, he glanced toward the bed, where Jiang Suizhou seemed to be already fast asleep.

Huo Wujiu's fingers idly rubbed the page.

After dining alone that evening, he'd grown inexplicably irritable, to the point that he couldn't read a single word.

Huo Wujiu attributed this irritation to his legs.

The wounds on his legs were slowly healing, but he'd had no sensation in them up until a few days ago. As the weather took a turn for the worse, he began to feel a slight pain in the severed tendons.

It was a faint, stinging pain, emanating from where the meridians¹³ in his legs had been severed.

This pain differed from the sharp agony of the original injury; it wasn't anywhere near as intense. It was more like a dull blade scraping against bone. As it was relatively mild, it hadn't bothered Huo Wujiu the last couple of days.

But today, it rained.

The dampness seemed to trigger it, sending a wave of pain through the tendons all the way to his lower back. It was a deep, gnawing ache that came in relentless surges, as if someone had reached into his flesh and was tugging at his sinew.

Huo Wujiu endured it quietly.

But there was more to his low mood than that. He had spent the evening lost in thought, ostensibly reading a book. But strangely, every time he heard footsteps outside, he would instinctively hone in on the sound before it inevitably faded away into nothing. Each time this cycle repeated, his irritation grew.

He didn't consciously realize it, but he was waiting for something.

Occasionally, he could hear Meng Qianshan sending servants to ask when Jiang Suizhou would return. The servants ran back and forth, only to once again report that the prince was indeed still busy.

Huo Wujiu frowned almost imperceptibly.

It wasn't until the rain outside began to ease and the night watchman announced that it was nine that Huo Wujiu finally heard the footsteps he'd been waiting to hear.

They were light, unhurried. The moment they reached his ears, he knew it was Jiang Suizhou.

He lowered his eyes and turned a page.

He wasn't spending the night with that concubine this time?

Huo Wujiu gave a nearly inaudible snort.

With that, the irritation that had been simmering all evening gradually dissipated. Even the corners of his mouth were compelled into a slight smile.

However, Jiang Suizhou didn't exchange any words with him today. After tidying up, he collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep.

Only now, with no one around, did Huo Wujiu lift his eyes. His gaze quietly fell on Jiang Suizhou.

Such a frail creature. Spending the night with that weak, peacemaking fool had left him utterly drained. And still he tried to imitate others by filling his rear courtyard with concubines?

He really had a death wish.

A person like him should remain safely under the protection of others, nurtured and sheltered from the elements like a delicate plant in a

greenhouse. He should be spared from hardships, and certainly not allowed to entertain such frivolous and self-destructive impulses that might attract trouble.

At this thought, Huo Wujiu's heart beat a little faster, and he felt a slight itch in his chest.

He paused, then calmly withdrew his gaze, trying to suppress something that he could feel stirring dangerously within him. He picked up the book again.

Zhang Sheng took the maiden's hand, delicate as silk and twice as soft, thus sending a ripple of warmth through his heart. She looked shyly up at him, her cheeks flush with a rosy glow. As the saying goes...

...What kind of nonsense had Meng Qianshan brought him?!

Huo Wujiu's face darkened, and he tossed the book aside.

The soft thud startled the person on the bed, causing him to shudder a little.

Huo Wujiu heard the faint sound and turned to look. Jiang Suizhou was tightly cocooned in the blankets. Despite his reaction to the sound, it seemed he hadn't woken up fully. He rolled over and continued to sleep.

Something was off. Jiang Suizhou didn't usually sleep so tightly swaddled. As Huo Wujiu watched, he couldn't help but notice that his breathing seemed heavier than usual, as if labored.

Huo Wujiu frowned. Was he sick?

He didn't wish to invite trouble by interfering in any of this. Better to call Meng Qianshan here now.

That was what he intended to do, anyway. But somehow, he found himself moving to Jiang Suizhou's bedside instead of the door, as if his hands had developed a mind of their own as soon as he placed them upon the wheels.

Jiang Suizhou had wrapped himself so thoroughly in the blanket that only a few strands of his black, smooth hair were visible on the pillow.

Huo Wujiu hesitantly reached out and gripped Jiang Suizhou's shoulder through the blanket.

The man was actually somehow thinner and frailer than he'd expected. Even through the thick blanket, Huo Wujiu could effortlessly encircle his shoulder with one hand.

Huo Wujiu easily turned him over.

His face was unnaturally pale, and his eyes were tightly closed. He was quivering, and his eyelashes fluttered slightly as he took shaky, labored breaths through ashen lips.

His terribly fragile appearance startled Huo Wujiu so much that he instantly released his shoulder, as if even that might be enough to hurt him in his current state.

Then he raised his hand, the motion a little clumsy, and placed it on Jiang Suizhou's forehead.

...Was this how they checked for fevers?

Jiang Suizhou didn't seem to be running a fever, though. His forehead wasn't hot but freezing cold. He must have gotten a chill while he was out and had not yet become feverish.

Huo Wujiu decided it was time to call for Meng Qianshan.

But as he began to pull away, a soft, icy hand slipped out from the blanket. Though it wrapped itself limply around his wrist, it had him held firmly in place.

There was absolutely no strength left in its grip, and yet Huo Wujiu found himself unable to move.

“Don’t go,” Jiang Suizhou said softly, his voice trembling.

He seemed somehow far away, like he’d fallen into an icy abyss and now clutched at Huo Wujiu’s hand as if it were a lifeline.

“Don’t tell my mom,” he murmured. “I’ll be fine. I just need some sleep.”

Huo Wujiu didn’t know what he was talking about or who his “mom” was, but he easily recognized the fear and confusion in Jiang Suizhou’s barely audible voice.

As if he was afraid of being a burden.

Huo Wujiu paused. Then he gripped Jiang Suizhou’s hand back, as though he were possessed.

The Prince of Jing’s hand was long and slender, and the skin stretched smoothly over his well-defined knuckles. He easily enveloped that delicate hand within his palm.

Jiang Suizhou, delirious as he was at the moment, seemed to be at least conscious enough to understand that he’d found a source of warmth. A soft sigh escaped his pale lips, and he weakly but insistently strained to pull that warmth closer.

The next thing Huo Wujiu knew, a cold, smooth cheek was pressed against the back of his hand.

Jiang Suizhou quickly lost consciousness after lying down. He was soon enveloped in a chaotic dream, where time and space were jumbled.

He was just a young boy in his father's mansion, enduring the bullying from an assortment of random half brothers. He ran to his mother with tears in his eyes, but he stopped in the doorway when he saw her sitting alone in her room, weeping silently. She was crying so hard that he feared her soul might leave her body entirely. The sight left him unable to voice his own grievances.

Then he saw the emperor's repulsive smile and a group of ministers he'd only seen in portraits. They leered at him with a mix of expressions, filling him with unease and trepidation, leaving him again too fearful to speak.

And he saw Huo Wujiu, bloodstained saber in hand. His gaze was as frigid as the day Jiang Suizhou had lifted the bridal veil. Huo Wujiu fixed those terrible eyes on him, ready to chop off his head and hang it on the city wall to dry.

Jiang Suizhou wanted to run, but his legs were rooted to the spot. Huo Wujiu approached, then as he reached out with a bloodstained hand, Jiang Suizhou closed his eyes and waited for death.

But death never came.

Huo Wujiu did not use his powerful, veiny hands to wring his neck. Instead, he reached out and gently touched his face.

Jiang Suizhou wondered if he'd meant to touch his neck instead, maybe to pinpoint the best spot to slice, but missed and touched his face instead.

But Huo Wujiu's hand stayed on his face. He didn't remove it.

And after that, Jiang Suizhou slowly woke up.

Just like in his dream, his mind was naught but whirling chaos, while his body was ablaze with heat. He blearily opened his eyes, but the flickering candlelight seemed so bright it was a struggle to keep them open.

His entire body felt unbearably heavy, and he had a vague awareness that something was in his hand. He took a deep breath, but a spate of hoarse coughs erupted before he could speak.

"Your Highness!"

It was Meng Qianshan's voice.

Jiang Suizhou coughed and coughed until his vision blurred. Just then, the thing he was grasping suddenly tightened around his hand.

Slightly cool and very strong, it pulled him to sit upright.

Then, another hand slowly began to pat his back, and his coughing gradually subsided.

Jiang Suizhou finally opened his watering eyes.

In the bright light, he saw Meng Qianshan kneeling by his bedside, leaning against the edge. His eyes were reddened with concern as he gazed at him, his lips quivering, though he dared not speak.

In Jiang Suizhou's grip was a large, rugged hand marked by prominent veins and knuckles.

Jiang Suizhou, still feverish and slow, stared at it in confusion. His eyes slowly traveled up the arm to its owner's face, where he met a pair of intense, black eyes.

Startled, Jiang Suizhou let go of the hand.

Huo Wujiu calmly stopped patting his back, then pulled over a pillow and propped him up against it.

"He's awake," he said coolly as he turned his head.

A young doctor hurried forward and knelt by the bed to take Jiang Suizhou's pulse.

Huo Wujiu wheeled himself back a couple of paces. He rested his right hand—the one Jiang Suizhou had held—on his knee. Unnoticed by anyone amid the flurry of activity around the prince, he slowly rubbed those fingers together before curling them into a fist.

As if trying to hold on to a sensation.

The servants, seeing that Jiang Suizhou was awake, stopped their tasks and gathered around the bed as the doctor took his pulse.

"Your Highness is still weak from overexertion, and the damp chill has invaded your body and left you with a cold," the doctor announced as he stood up from his bedside. "I've prepared some medicine in the outer chamber. Once you drink it and rest, your fever should recede by tomorrow morning. However, you must rest in the residence for a few days and avoid any strenuous activity until you've fully recovered."

"Yes, of course," Meng Qianshan quickly replied, then instructed the maids to bring in the medicine.

Jiang Suizhou leaned against the soft pillow and rubbed his temples. Only now did he understand the doctor's words.

So he'd overworked himself. Then with the rain today, he'd caught a cold.

The early spring rain wasn't particularly chilly, and Jiang Suizhou hadn't even gotten wet, but the prince's body was weak enough that it didn't matter, apparently.

He sighed in resignation.

But it was for the best. Being sick meant he could rest at home without any guilt. If only he could manage to stay ill until the emperor's birthday banquet. That would give him a valid excuse to avoid attending, and Huo Wujiu wouldn't have to go either...

Thinking of Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou's muddled mind paused.

Had he really woken up holding Huo Wujiu's hand?

It seemed undeniable that he had, but why? He had no idea when or why Huo Wujiu had come to his bedside or how they'd ended up holding hands.

Maybe he was more delirious from the fever than he realized.

But before he could ponder further, a strong, bitter smell invaded his nose.

Jiang Suizhou frowned.

Someone brought him a bowl of pitch-black medicine in a white jade bowl.

The aggressive aroma instantly triggered a coughing fit that left his throat dry and spasming. Startled, Meng Qianshan hurriedly patted his back

and called out in worry.

When the coughing subsided, Jiang Suizhou turned his head away.

He'd always disliked traditional Chinese medicine, even before his transmigration. Unfortunately, the ancient version of it was even worse than he could possibly have imagined.

"Please, Your Highness!" Meng Qianshan begged, sensing his reticence. "You must drink the medicine!"

Jiang Suizhou didn't respond. He held his breath as he stared down at the medicine in front of him. The smell was so pungent that he feared even one more whiff of it might cut his lifespan in half.

Meng Qianshan looked to be practically on the verge of tears.

"Your Highness! If you don't take the medicine, how will you recover?"

Jiang Suizhou paused.

That was a great point, actually.

If he didn't take the medicine, he wouldn't get better.

And if he didn't get better, then he couldn't very well take Huo Wujiu to the emperor's birthday banquet, could he?

From that day on, Jiang Suizhou settled down to rest at home.

Many court officials sent him get-well gifts. Even the emperor had sent over a royal physician, ostensibly to treat him—or so he claimed. Jiang

Suizhou knew the emperor suspected him of feigning illness. Hence, he'd sent someone over to check.

But Jiang Suizhou was genuinely ill. The royal physician reported that the Prince of Jing's constitution was too weak, that even a spring rain would be enough to put him one foot in the grave. The delighted emperor then sent him a pile of useless gold and jewels the next day, telling Jiang Suizhou to rest and not to worry about court affairs.

Ji You, the Minister of Rites, knew that it was the task he'd assigned that led to Jiang Suizhou falling ill. When Jiang Suizhou had Meng Qianshan convey a message to him, the remorseful Ji You sent back several volumes of miscellaneous historical texts as an apology.

Equal parts amused and exasperated, Jiang Suizhou quickly instructed Meng Qianshan to put those books away where he couldn't see them.

The next day, his fever subsided, but the illness lingered.

Jiang Suizhou had never experienced such a miserable cold before.

The original owner of this body must have had a particularly fragile respiratory system. Exposure to the slightest chill made his throat and lungs ache in discomfort. His overall poor health caused his condition to fluctuate over the next few days—one moment he felt as cold as ice, and the next he had a low fever.

Despite his illness tormenting him to the brink of lifelessness, Jiang Suizhou still found time to secretly ask Meng Qianshan if they should move Huo Wujiu out to avoid infecting him.

After all, a nasty cold seemed like an excellent excuse to finally get Huo Wujiu to leave without the risk of insulting him.

There was no need to keep up the ruse at this point. Not only were the emperor and Pang Shao completely convinced of his homosexuality, but they earnestly believed him to enjoy some rather unspeakable debauchery. So, in that case, why force Huo Wujiu to stay here and sleep on the daybed?

But Meng Qianshan shook his head in reply, and he smiled so widely that his eyes narrowed into happy slits.

“No need! Madam Huo isn’t afraid of this,” he whispered, taking advantage of Huo Wujiu’s absence from the room.

Jiang Suizhou frowned.

“Ah, His Highness doesn’t know!” Meng Qianshan exclaimed with obvious delight. “Madam Huo is the one who found you ill in your bed. When your servant arrived, the madam was already holding your hand, and he didn’t let go until His Highness woke up!”

By this point, Meng Qianshan was grinning from ear to ear.

Jiang Suizhou was speechless.

He vaguely remembered something along those lines...but Huo Wujiu hadn’t been holding his hand, exactly. Jiang Suizhou had been the one clinging to him.

However, Meng Qianshan wouldn’t believe him, so he didn’t bother to offer any explanations. It was patently ridiculous, anyway. Huo Wujiu was disabled, but surely he could shake off a feverish patient, right?

“Your Highness, I really do think Madam Huo has some feelings for you,” Meng Qianshan added with a chuckle. “Ah! Truly, sincerity can move even metal and stone!”

Jiang Suizhou's expression cooled, and he quickly shooed Meng Qianshan out.

Indeed, a lie will always come around and bite you in the end. He should've expected there'd soon be a price to pay.

Jiang Suizhou gritted his teeth and shook his head as he watched Meng Qianshan cheerfully retreat from the room. He pushed the thought of moving Huo Wujiu out to the back of his mind for now.

Although his illness continued to fluctuate in severity, he gradually recovered, day by day.

The emperor had sent a royal physician once, but there had been no further news since. Then, unexpectedly, a few days later, another royal physician arrived from the palace.

This time, Jiang Suizhou noticed something different.

The previous physician sent by the emperor had merely taken his pulse, seen that he was seriously ill, and left.

This one was different. He took his time carefully examining Jiang Suizhou and even thoroughly checked the medicine he had been taking over the past few days.

Most likely, this physician was sent by Pang Shao.

The emperor only wanted to see if Jiang Suizhou was ill. Once that was confirmed, he was satisfied and paid him no further attention. Pang Shao, on the other hand, intended to keep an eye on Jiang Suizhou. He would monitor his health and estimate when he would recover, all to ensure he wouldn't seize this chance to make any moves.

Jiang Suizhou found this surveillance terribly irritating, but there wasn't much to be done about it. Every few days, the persistent physician would return.

On his third visit, after carefully examining Jiang Suizhou, he offered a knowing smile and gave his assessment.

“Your Highness is recovering well. In two or three days, you should make a full recovery. As it happens, His Majesty’s birthday banquet is in four days. The emperor has been quite worried about whether you’ll be able to attend, but I’m confident that His Majesty won’t be disappointed.”

With that, he left.

Jiang Suizhou sat on the bed, his breathing ragged with suppressed anger.

He knew this was Pang Shao’s way of threatening him. He was letting him know that they were aware of his condition and that he couldn’t use it to escape. He had to bring Huo Wujiu to the palace for the emperor’s amusement.

Just then, Meng Qianshan entered with the prepared medicine.

Jiang Suizhou glanced at it and then looked away. He’d ingested so much of the foul concoction that he felt as though he’d been thoroughly steeped in it, to the point his entire body must have reeked of the same bitterness.

Besides, it would be better if he didn’t drink the medicine. At worst, he’d stay sick for a few more days. That would be far preferable to Jiang Suizhou than letting those people have their way. He could spare Huo Wujiu the humiliation.

“Put it down,” Jiang Suizhou ordered calmly. “I’ll drink it later.”

Meng Qianshan carefully observed him.

He knew his lord was in a bad mood and probably didn't feel like drinking the medicine right now. And to be fair, Jiang Suizhou had been very diligently taking his medicine over the past few days. Other than the first time, he'd never refused.

Placing his trust in Jiang Suizhou's word, Meng Qianshan obediently placed the medicine on the side table and left.

With Meng Qianshan gone, Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu were left alone in the room.

Jiang Suizhou sneaked a glance at Huo Wujiu, who was quietly flipping through a book and minding his own business.

Seeing that the coast was clear, Jiang Suizhou slipped out of bed and picked up the bowl of medicine from the side table.

He didn't notice that Huo Wujiu had heard the rustling of the blanket and immediately turned to look at him.

Clad in thin sleeping robes and holding the medicine in one hand, Jiang Suizhou was completely oblivious as he unsteadily made his way over to a corner of the room, where an ornamental tree stood in a purple clay pot.

If he dumped out two days' worth of medicine, his fragile body would surely relapse. At that point, they would have to carry him to the birthday banquet if they wanted him to attend so badly.

This would work perfectly for everyone.

Jiang Suizhou stood before the unsuspecting potted tree and began to tilt the jade bowl. Just before the repulsive liquid could reach the lip of the bowl, a hand firmly grasped his wrist.

Startled, he turned around to find that Huo Wujiu had wheeled over to his side at some point, entirely unnoticed. He gripped Jiang Suizhou's wrist in one hand, effortlessly rendering it immobile. Despite the fact that Huo Wujiu was looking up at him from below, Jiang Suizhou felt the full, imposing force of his sharp gaze.

For some reason, he felt a pang of guilt.

"What are you doing?" Huo Wujiu asked.

Jiang Suizhou steadied his nerves.

"None of your business. Now let go of me."

But Huo Wujiu's grip didn't loosen in the slightest.

"Drink it."

It wasn't a request or a suggestion. It was more like a command.

Jiang Suizhou adopted the same stern voice he used with Meng Qianshan when he stepped out of line. He looked down at Huo Wujiu with an appropriately haughty, arrogant expression.

"You dare to use that tone with me?" he sneered.

Huo Wujiu said nothing.

Then, in an instant, the force applied to Jiang Suizhou's hand doubled. He found the bowl slowly, inevitably approaching his lips as Huo Wujiu forced his hand upward.

Words were no longer necessary. He enunciated his command through actions.

The bitter smell assailed Jiang Suizhou's nostrils, and his mouth curled into a frown. He dropped his gaze to look at Huo Wujiu, but the

man's expression was unyielding. Clearly, there was no room for negotiation.

Jiang Suizhou felt inexplicably aggrieved, and suddenly it all boiled over.

He knew the emperor despised him. From the moment he arrived here until now, he'd endured countless humiliations and had long since grown accustomed to it.

He also knew how miserable it was to be sick. Over the past few days, he had been tormented by illness to the point he wished for death. Never in his entire life had he been so awfully ill for so long.

If Jiang Suizhou had been concerned only with his own pride, then he would have easily acquiesced to the emperor's demands. It would be far better to let the emperor have his verbal victory in exchange for an end to this suffering.

It wasn't a matter of pride; it was a matter of fear! He'd been backed into this corner because he was so afraid that if he allowed Huo Wujiu to be humiliated, then he would hold Jiang Suizhou accountable and demand his life in return.

He let out a humorless laugh.

"General Huo, do you know *why* I'm throwing away the medicine?" he asked.

Huo Wujiu still didn't speak, but he held Jiang Suizhou's wrist in a silent confrontation.

Jiang Suizhou continued.

“Did you hear what the royal physician just said? Do you know why he keeps visiting me? And why he made sure that I remember that invitation?” he fired off angrily. “It’s because the emperor has demanded that I bring you to his birthday banquet. He wants to see you.”

It’d been some time since he’d said so many words in one go, and it left him a bit winded. He had to stop and cough a bit before he recovered enough to continue.

“You know what it is that he wants from you, right? While I’d rather not get involved, I refuse to allow myself to be publicly humiliated like that. If I pour out this medicine and remain ill for a few more days, it will work out in both of our favors. Understand?”

Having said what he needed to say, Jiang Suizhou took a few labored breaths to steady himself. He looked down at Huo Wujiu, who had been watching and listening to his tirade with an expression of serene composure.

“I understand,” he finally said once Jiang Suizhou had caught his breath. “Drink the medicine.”

Jiang Suizhou looked at him and frowned.

This man was a prisoner of war in an enemy country. He had been subjected to such heinous torture that he could no longer stand on his own two legs, and yet he still looked at Jiang Suizhou with those steady, placid eyes that inexplicably exuded reassuring strength.

“I have nothing to be afraid of,” Huo Wujiu continued. “It won’t kill me, so if he wants me to go, I’ll go.”

He hesitated for a moment, suddenly awkward.

“So, you shouldn’t be afraid either,” he added stiffly.

Chapter 26

NO ONE HAD EVER said such a thing to Jiang Suizhou in his entire life.

How could Huo Wujiu be so endlessly confident? Regardless of who he was or what he'd done before his capture, even if he were some supernatural, demon-slaying war god, he was now nothing more than a clay statue. Didn't he realize that right now, anyone could shatter him with the lightest touch?

"You shouldn't be afraid either."

And yet, when Huo Wujiu spoke these words, Jiang Suizhou found them strangely convincing. They carried a weight that made him feel as if Huo Wujiu truly, genuinely meant to protect him.

Following this line of thought left Jiang Suizhou dumbfounded.

Huo Wujiu could tell that Jiang Suizhou's will to fight was quickly draining. The prince's expression remained cold, but the dazed look in his eyes betrayed him.

He sighed inwardly and released Jiang Suizhou's wrist.

The harmless white rabbit still insisted on cloaking himself in the skin of a wolf.

He took the jade bowl from Jiang Suizhou's hand, which finally snapped him out of his daze. Still safely holding the medicine, Huo Wujiu fixed his commanding gaze on Jiang Suizhou from below.

"Go back to bed," he said.

His steady, unyielding tone was that of a general giving an order to his soldiers.

Only then did Jiang Suizhou realize that he was clad in nothing but thin sleeping robes. His ankles were also exposed.

Early spring wasn't especially cold, yet even that was unbearable for his frail constitution. In just a brief moment, his body had been chilled to the core.

Jiang Suizhou sheepishly returned to his bed.

Huo Wujiu used one hand to wheel himself to the bedside, where he placed the medicine bowl on the side table.

However, he didn't leave. When Jiang Suizhou looked over, he realized Huo Wujiu was still watching him calmly. Though he didn't speak, his demeanor clearly indicated that he wouldn't leave until Jiang Suizhou drank the medicine.

Jiang Suizhou silently gritted his teeth.

Who's the prince here, you or me?! A concubine shouldn't be acting this imperious. You're clearly overstepping your station!

Despite grumbling so in his heart, he pursed his lips, picked up the medicine bowl, and drank it down in one gulp.

...It was unbearably bitter.

Jiang Suizhou's illness finally improved. Coincidentally, so did a few other matters.

After that day, he came to the realization that perhaps he really didn't have anything to fear anymore. After all, what he truly feared was Huo Wujiu holding him accountable for any mistreatment endured while imprisoned in Southern Jing.

But now, Huo Wujiu knew what the emperor intended to do and said he would face it without fear. No matter how disgracefully the emperor behaved, it had nothing to do with Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou could rest easy, knowing that Huo Wujiu had recognized his attempts to shield him. He had rejected that protection of his own free will.

Still, he couldn't help but worry a little bit. Over the past few days, whenever his eyes met Huo Wujiu's in the room that they shared, he found himself wondering what exactly the emperor had planned.

This was a grand occasion, especially for the emperor himself, so it was unlikely there'd be any bloodshed. In other words, Huo Wujiu's physical safety was assured. Since the emperor was a brainless fool, the humiliation would likely amount to a few rounds of ultimately meaningless verbal bullying and provocation. Certainly nothing to look forward to, but also nothing to be too concerned about.

But beside the emperor stood Pang Shao. Now that man was a plotter, with a belly full of malicious schemes. Jiang Suizhou knew that Pang Shao would faithfully advise the emperor on the application of some underhanded tactics.

Of course, all of said tactics would be aimed at Huo Wujiu. Since Jiang Suizhou had already distanced himself from the situation, he had nothing to fear.

And yet, his thoughts were dominated by worry. As the birthday banquet drew nearer, his anxiety only deepened.

It was strange, but Jiang Suizhou attributed his nerves to the shared predicament between Huo Wujiu and himself.

They were two men on the same boat, buffeted by the waves and wind, sharing both glory and downfall.

What other explanation was there?

In any case, the three days passed quickly. By the time Jiang Suizhou had fully recovered from his cold, the emperor's birthday banquet was just around the corner.

The day before the event, the royal physician sent by Pang Shao paid Jiang Suizhou another visit.

When the physician arrived, Jiang Suizhou was not in bed but fully dressed. He sat in the main hall, clad in a thin black cloak while he casually read a book. The physician approached, took his pulse, and then stepped back to kneel before him.

Jiang Suizhou withdrew his hand, picked up the teacup on the table, and glanced at the physician indifferently.

"Congratulations, Your Highness," the physician said, still kneeling. "Your health has greatly improved. This subject can report to the emperor that you will be able to attend tomorrow's birthday banquet without issue..."

Jiang Suizhou's brow furrowed.

In a flash, he slammed the teacup down at the physician's feet. A loud *clang* pierced the relaxed atmosphere.

The servants in the room were all startled. Even Huo Wujiu looked over from where he was sitting by the window.

Jiang Suizhou sat slouched in the spacious armchair, with one arm draped over the armrest. His cloak was open and hung loosely from his delicate frame, lending to his air of indolence.

His beautiful features were striking as always, but his mien was one of arrogance and apathy. Though his icy gaze instantly struck fear into the hearts of those it landed upon, he also possessed an inexplicable allure. Like a poppy, he had a dangerous, nearly irresistible charm that captivated and terrified in equal measure.

The teacup shattered on the ground. Hot tea splashed onto the physician's robe, and he choked back the rest of his words, trembling.

"The birthday banquet," Jiang Suizhou repeated slowly. "Always something about the birthday banquet. Do you keep reminding me because you think I don't want to attend?"

He knew that this physician was one of Pang Shao's lackeys. While ostensibly here to monitor his health, he was also on Pang Shao's orders to make trouble for him.

Pang Shao was shamelessly taking advantage of Jiang Suizhou's perceived weakness to flaunt his power, which was unacceptable. There was little Jiang Suizhou could do about Pang Shao monitoring his health, but he couldn't just let him have his way without kicking up a bit of a fuss at least.

He'd make a little trouble himself.

"Of course not!" the physician replied, visibly shaken. "His Majesty ordered this subject to—"

“Did my royal brother say that we’re on such awful terms that I wouldn’t even attend his birthday banquet?”

This was, of course, the truth. But such truths were meant to be left unspoken, for whoever spoke it first would be labeled as unfilial and disloyal.

And if a subordinate said it...that would be considered sowing discord between lord and subject.

The physician dared not admit it and remained kneeling.

“His Majesty certainly did not!” he blurted out desperately, head bowed. “It’s just that this subject...”

Jiang Suizhou gave a joyless laugh.

“Naturally, His Majesty wouldn’t say such a thing. It’s clearly you, a lowly servant, acting out on your own,” he said. “Since His Majesty sent you to examine me, you should focus on your duties. By speaking out of turn and tarnishing His Majesty’s reputation, you leave me no choice but to punish you on his behalf.”

The physician panicked at these words. He hadn’t expected the powerless Prince of Jing, who had been so meek and submissive during his previous visits, to lash out so viciously. Truthfully, he’d thought the prince to be something of a pushover.

No one respected the Prince of Jing, whether inside or outside the palace. Even Minister Pang, when he’d sent him to examine the Prince of Jing, had told him to remind the prince of his place.

The physician opened his mouth to explain, but Jiang Suizhou didn’t give him the chance.

“Meng Qianshan,” he called.

The eunuch had been waiting at the door and quickly stepped forward.

“Cane him with the board, then personally escort him back to the palace. Tell them that this man deliberately sowed discord between me and His Majesty. I’ve already punished him, so the rest is up to His Majesty to decide.”

Meng Qianshan had long disliked the physician, so he was overjoyed upon hearing this. He immediately summoned the servants to assist in removing him from the premises.

“Beat him far away from here,” Jiang Suizhou added quickly, his tone indifferent. “I don’t need the sound disturbing my thoughts.”

Meng Qianshan gave his agreement and directed the servants to drag the physician out.

Once the room was quiet, a maid quickly stepped forward. She carefully cleaned up the mess and poured Jiang Suizhou a fresh cup of tea.

Jiang Suizhou picked it up.

The physician was one of Pang Shao’s men, so he wouldn’t lose his life upon being sent back. Nevertheless, to maintain appearances, he would inevitably be dismissed from his position and banished from the palace.

As a university professor, Jiang Suizhou had never even disciplined a student, much less been responsible for someone being beaten and stripped of their position simply for offending him.

But he’d had no choice.

Those people were relentless in tormenting him. If he didn't retaliate, they would only grow more audacious. He'd been dragged into the dire circumstances of the body's original owner. If he couldn't bring himself to harm his opponents, then he was as good as dead.

Jiang Suizhou looked out at the ornate rooftops that stretched out beneath the gloomy sky, one after another. Right now, it gave him the impression of a sprawling chessboard, and he was just another piece entrapped by the game.

He let out a slow, imperceptible sigh, then picked up the book he'd placed on the table.

He had long grown accustomed to Huo Wujiu's shadowlike presence in his room, so he didn't notice that Huo Wujiu had caught his every move and expression.

This weak fool. Even when he was punishing someone who deserved it, he felt uneasy. How fortunate for him that he'd been born into a peaceful and prosperous era. He'd never witnessed bloodshed, much less stepped onto a battlefield. If he ever saw a killing, he'd be frightened out of his mind.

Huo Wujiu lowered his eyes, concealing the complexity of the emotions within them.

Truly, this man was meant to live his entire life pampered, in an era of tranquility.

Early in the morning of the twenty-fourth day of the second month, a light drizzle began to fall outside the window.

It was the emperor's birthday.

The rain continued the entire day. As dusk fell and they prepared to leave for the palace, it showed no signs of letting up.

Jiang Suizhou stood in his quarters, dressed in appropriately elaborate ceremonial robes and ready to go. He didn't have to wait long for Huo Wujiu to emerge from the other room, wheeled out by Meng Qianshan.

Given the circumstances, Jiang Suizhou had given orders that Huo Wujiu's attire remain understated. However, even in a simple dark blue brocade robe and a modest hairpiece, he exuded an imposing aura. His noble bearing was impossible to conceal.

Although the room was brightly lit already, Huo Wujiu seemed to glow with his own light. He was so striking that it compelled Jiang Suizhou's gaze to linger on him, and it took considerable effort for him to tear his eyes away.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, trying to cover up his momentary distraction.

"Be alert when we enter the palace later," he said, glancing at Meng Qianshan.

Meng Qianshan naturally understood that his lord was reminding him to take good care of Huo Wujiu, and he gave his genuine and enthusiastic assurance.

The carriage that arrived to take Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu to the palace was modest in size, and Huo Wujiu's wheelchair was rather bulky. Naturally, the two found themselves seated quite close together.

As the curtain fell and their surroundings grew quiet, the confined space suddenly began to feel unexpectedly intimate. There was nothing else between them but the sound of their breathing.

The atmosphere left Jiang Suizhou feeling particularly awkward.

They were alone, sitting so close they were nearly touching, and suddenly Jiang Suizhou didn't know where to even put his hands. He wanted to say something to break the silence, but he had nothing to say. All he was aware of was Huo Wujiu's steady breathing, in and out, which almost seemed to intertwine with his. Even his own heartbeat seemed to slow down to match it.

Think of something else, Jiang Suizhou urged himself. Like what the emperor might say at the banquet and how to respond...

Just then, the carriage jerked forward and flung the distracted and unprepared Jiang Suizhou careening to the side.

Right into Huo Wujiu's shoulder.



Chapter 27

THAT MUSCULAR SHOULDER was firm and solid, and the impact made Jiang Suizhou see stars.

A hand quickly gripped Jiang Suizhou's arm and pulled him upright. His head was spinning, and the hand's tight grasp was so strong that it actually hurt a little bit, but it kept him steady enough to regain his bearings.

"Sit properly," he heard Huo Wujiu say.

Jiang Suizhou awkwardly rubbed his forehead and cleared his throat.

"Sorry," he said, trying to keep his voice calm and indifferent.

Huo Wujiu gave a faint hum of acknowledgment.

As the carriage moved, the silence quickly filled with the sounds of the wheels rolling and the wind rustling the curtains. Slowly, the awkward atmosphere eased a bit.

After a moment, Jiang Suizhou sneaked a glance at Huo Wujiu.

He was slightly turned away, his gaze calm as he looked out the window. The curtain fluttered, letting in a few drops of rain. Faint light from outside fell on Huo Wujiu's face, casting warm dapples of glow on his cheeks.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't tell if it was his imagination, but Huo Wujiu's lips seemed unusually pale.

The dimness inside the carriage made it hard to be sure.

He couldn't help but look a few more times.

Finally, Huo Wujiu slowly turned to gaze back to Jiang Suizhou.

Caught in the act, Jiang Suizhou paused to think of how to resolve this.

“Are you cold?” he asked stiffly.

It shouldn’t be cold. It was already past early spring, and although the rain outside was a bit chilly, it shouldn’t be a problem for Huo Wujiu. After all, not everyone had a body as fragile as Jiang Suizhou’s.

“No.”

Huo Wujiu’s gaze subtly shifted to his own legs.

They had been aching faintly since the rain started that morning. He’d already grown accustomed to the pain, but it had suddenly intensified after he left the residence.

It felt as if someone were pressing a saw or a blunt axe into his meridians and pulling down on the entire leg, like some kind of torture method. The agony was so intense that even his scalp felt numb, and his hands clenched into tight fists resting on his knees.

Of course, there was no need to reveal this to Jiang Suizhou. It would only alarm him.

However, the Prince of Jing seemed particularly eager to strike up a conversation with him. His nervous, distracted behavior had not escaped Huo Wujiu’s notice. And now here he was secretly staring at him as well. What exactly did the man want from him?

“And you?” he asked in return. “Are you cold?”

Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

“I asked because I noticed that you kept looking outside, so I thought it might be because the wind is a bit chilly.”

Huo Wujiu let out a low laugh.

“Why was that your first guess?” he teased, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “And not that I wanted to escape?”

The softly fluttering curtain caused the light in his eyes to flicker in such a way that, for a brief moment, Jiang Suizhou could swear he saw a playful glint within them.

Jiang Suizhou froze. Panicked, he quickly turned back to the window.

“Go ahead and try, then. We’ll just see if the emperor has people secretly watching you,” he said, struggling to keep his tone flat and unaffected.

...Was that really all it took to fluster the prince so?

Huo Wujiu looked away, and the smile on his lips deepened slightly.

The carriage came to a halt outside Kaiyang Gate.

As Jiang Suizhou stepped down, he noticed that many other carriages were already parked nearby. The place was bustling with activity as court officials continued to arrive with their families.

Instantly, Jiang Suizhou felt the weight of numerous eyes upon him. Not just him, though, but also on the carriage behind him—everyone was waiting to catch a glimpse of Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou's expression was detached and arrogant as he stood by the carriage, watching the servants quickly step forward to help move Huo Wujiu's wheelchair.

The movement of the crowd had slowed to a crawl. Jiang Suizhou frowned impatiently.

You want to watch the show, huh? Fine, I'll give you a show.

"Hurry up!" he barked at the servants. "How long do you expect me to wait?"

The servants bowed and apologized as they hurriedly helped Huo Wujiu down from the carriage.

Jiang Suizhou swept his cold gaze over the surrounding officials. He projected a demeanor of extreme irritability, as if he might lash out at any moment. Immediately, the crowd averted their gazes, pretended they hadn't seen anything, and dispersed.

Satisfied, Jiang Suizhou turned away, clasped his hands behind his back, and strode through Kaiyang Gate.

Meng Qianshan followed, pushing Huo Wujiu's wheelchair.

The Prince of Jing seemed to be in a sour mood, on the verge of erupting at the slightest wrong. Even the chattiest ministers refrained from approaching him to exchange pleasantries. As a result, their journey proceeded with little disturbance.

However, the stares continued unabated. Some were discreet, others shameless, but just about everyone shot at least one glance at the man in the wheelchair behind him.

Huo Wujiu.

Until recently, that very name had struck fear into every heart in Southern Jing. It was a harbinger of death.

This was the man who'd led his troops from Yangguan all the way to Yecheng to drive them out of their ancestral lands. He was the reason that they'd been pushed south of the great river.

Late last year, he'd again rallied an army. He led tens of thousands of troops to the river's edge, poised to cross and destroy their Great Jing. But the river was easy to defend and hard to invade, and on top of that, Northern Liang's main forces had inexplicably failed to follow the vanguard. Seizing this opportunity, the defending general surrounded Huo Wujiu's thousand-strong army.

Even so, the battle dragged on for seven or eight days, and it was only when the invading troops ran out of supplies that Southern Jing managed to capture Huo Wujiu.

What did this mean for Great Jing?

It meant that despite having one foot in the grave, they'd managed to take down Wuchang, who'd come to demand their souls.

This deity had been broken and beaten into submission, and now it was time to parade him around the emperor's birthday banquet as if he were a family member of the Prince of Jing.

Naturally, nearly everyone was curious to see what death incarnate looked like now that he was merely a man in a wheelchair.

However, Huo Wujiu was nothing like the brutish, bearded figure they'd imagined him to be. On the contrary, he was an exceptionally handsome man.

His pallid face and tall, slender frame made him look almost vulnerable as he sat quietly in his wheelchair, yet his posture remained rigid and proud. He was dressed simply, but he exuded a sharpness like an unsheathed blade, encouraging people around him to keep their distance.

That atmosphere shifted slightly as Jiang Suizhou caught sight of a man in his peripheral vision.

Tall and burly, he looked like a bandit who had crawled out of the mountains only to find himself stuffed into a set of wide-sleeved ceremonial robes. His bearing combined with his dark skin made him impossible to ignore, especially when his red-rimmed eyes filled with sorrow and indignation as he stared unswervingly at Jiang Suizhou.

Oh, Ji Hongcheng's here, Jiang Suizhou thought as he took a deep, silent breath.

Ji Hongcheng was a rash and straightforward man. Seeing Huo Wujiu now, he might say or do something unpredictable.

Jiang Suizhou prepared himself, waiting for Ji Hongcheng to make a scene.

As anticipated, Ji Hongcheng strode toward him, his robes billowing in his wake. He looked like a black bear that had stumbled into a fabric shop, draped in silk and poised to pounce and devour.

But he stopped three steps away from Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou paused and frowned at him. But Ji Hongcheng only stood there, motionless.

...What was he doing?

Ji Hongcheng glared fiercely at him with his large, bell-like eyes for a few intense seconds, before he abruptly turned and walked away. The delicate-looking lady beside him hastened after him as she bowed apologetically to Jiang Suizhou, who was simply puzzled.

He just left? What was that all about?

Jiang Suizhou glanced at him in confusion. Perhaps the man didn't dare to cause a scene at the emperor's birthday banquet.

Unbeknownst to him, a tiny ball of paper no larger than a fly had shot through the air like an arrow and landed squarely on Ji Hongcheng's chest, falling into his arms as he approached.

No one noticed this tiny object, nor did anyone see who'd thrown it.

No one, that was, except Ji Hongcheng himself, who hurried off to hide in the restroom where he carefully unfolded the paper ball.

It was a note written in bold, forceful strokes that were unmistakably General Huo's handwriting.

"Stop sending letters. Bide your time.

When Lou Yue returns to the capital, send a willow branch."

Ji Hongcheng immediately understood what he meant.

So even without Ji Hongcheng telling him, General Huo had already made plans. His inaction was simply a matter of waiting for the right moment.

And that moment depended on one man: General Lou.

But General Lou was fiercely loyal to the emperor, and General Huo had rebelled. Would General Lou really help him?

Ji Hongcheng felt a little uneasy deep down. He stuffed the slip of paper into his mouth and swallowed it.

Huo Wujiu had anticipated running into Ji Hongcheng at the banquet today.

Although the man wanted to help him, he was of little use. Instead, his frequent letters, filled with useless information, only drew unwanted attention and caused trouble for the Prince of Jing's residence.

To Huo Wujiu, Ji Hongcheng's only value lay in helping him contact Lou Yue.

Huo Wujiu sat quietly in his wheelchair, his gaze inscrutable.

He'd endured and survived, not to grant Jiang Shunheng more time to humiliate him but to bide his time for a chance to escape. He had no allies in all of Southern Jing; Lou Yue was the only person he could rely on.

Though Lou Yue was on the opposite side of the conflict from his father and was now his enemy, he owed Huo Wujiu a life debt from years ago.

Huo Wujiu didn't care about being repaid for favors, nor would he ask Lou Yue to do anything against his principles. However, being stranded in enemy territory left him with no choice but to rely on what few connections he had in order to turn the tide in his favor.

Thinking this, he looked up at Jiang Suizhou.

The prince walked a step ahead of him, his figure tall and robes fluttering. He must have looked quite displeased, judging by the way people around them cautiously glanced their way but didn't dare approach.

If that day ever came, Jiang Shunheng would not let them go easily.

Huo Wujiu looked away again.

For as long as the heavens had yet to forsake him, as long as he possessed even a fragment of strength, he supposed he could use it to try to save this rabbit's life in the upheaval—if only out of respect for his kind heart and inexplicable infatuation.

Jiang Suizhou walked ahead. He was, of course, oblivious to Huo Wujiu's silent declaration.

A eunuch was already waiting for them when the palace attendants dropped them off at Qiwu Hall. Seeing Jiang Suizhou approach, the eunuch hurried forward with a smile and bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Prince of Jing," he said as he stepped aside. "This servant will escort you to your seat."

The eunuch gestured for Jiang Suizhou to enter, but then his gaze fell on the Prince of Jing's companion. Immediately, the eunuch's smile became more obsequious, and he stepped forward again.

"Your Highness, there are rules in the palace. Wives and concubines must sit in the women's section."

Then he turned and called out to someone behind him.

"Quickly, bring someone to escort the Prince of Jing's...companion to the banquet hall on the west—"

But Jiang Suizhou raised his hand and cut him off, his expression cold.

Send Huo Wujiu to sit with the women? Are you kidding?

Instantly, Jiang Suizhou understood what was going on. This was obviously a long-devised scheme to humiliate Huo Wujiu. Furthermore, it would isolate Huo Wujiu from Jiang Suizhou and leave him vulnerable to their underhanded tactics.

Therefore, he couldn't agree to these demands.

But how could he escape them?

Jiang Suizhou paused briefly to gather his thoughts. Then he cast a dark glance at Huo Wujiu before turning back to the eunuch again.

His eyes were ruthless and cold, and a faint but venomous smile curved his delicate mouth. It was a carefully crafted expression of sinister, boundless perversion.

"The thing is, you see," he said languidly, "my *companion* is quite unruly, and I'll need to keep an eye on him myself. I'm the only one who can control him, so I hope you can make an exception."

The prince's voice was soft but dangerous, and it sent a chill down the eunuch's spine. When he gathered the courage to cautiously look up, he saw the Prince of Jing standing boldly against the light, a sadistic smile on his lips.

His demeanor was not that of someone making a request, nor was it necessarily even a demand. It felt more like he was simply telling the eunuch that he wished to bring along a personal plaything for his amusement, and that was exactly what he was going to do.

Chapter 28

IT WAS COMMON KNOWLEDGE that the Prince of Jing was a shameless pervert.

Not only did he prefer to play with men, he would toy with them until they died. It was said that he took after his demonic concubine of a mother in that way. He was a succubus just as she was, born to drain the life force of men.

A little stunned, the eunuch felt his eyes involuntarily drift toward Huo Wujiu.

Though the man in the wheelchair was tall and imposing, his lips were pallid. His eyes were lowered, his expression blank. Despite his sharp and striking features, he looked almost pitiful sitting in Jiang Suizhou's shadow.

There was even a wound on his brow, the eunuch noted with alarm. Could it have been inflicted by the Prince of Jing himself?

The eunuch quickly averted his eyes. He failed to notice the emotions churning beneath the lowered lashes of the pitiful man sitting behind the Prince of Jing.

"Th-this is..." The eunuch trailed off and bowed his head, somewhat troubled.

He hesitated for a moment, then forced a smile and tried once more.

"Your Highness, this really goes against the rules."

Jiang Suizhou's expression hardened, but just as he was about to speak, a bit of movement caught in his peripheral vision.

A group of court officials were approaching from the steps below. They were clustered around a civil official dressed in vermilion court robes.

Vermilion robes meant upper-first rank.

The only person who could wear such robes was Pang Shao.

Jiang Suizhou's heart lodged itself in his throat.

The eunuch could be easily fooled, but Pang Shao was a crafty old fox. If Jiang Suizhou tried too hard to keep Huo Wujiu by his side, Pang Shao might see through his act.

He took a moment to steel himself for what he was about to do.

The chattering group drew nearer and nearer, and when the moment was just right, Jiang Suizhou made his move.

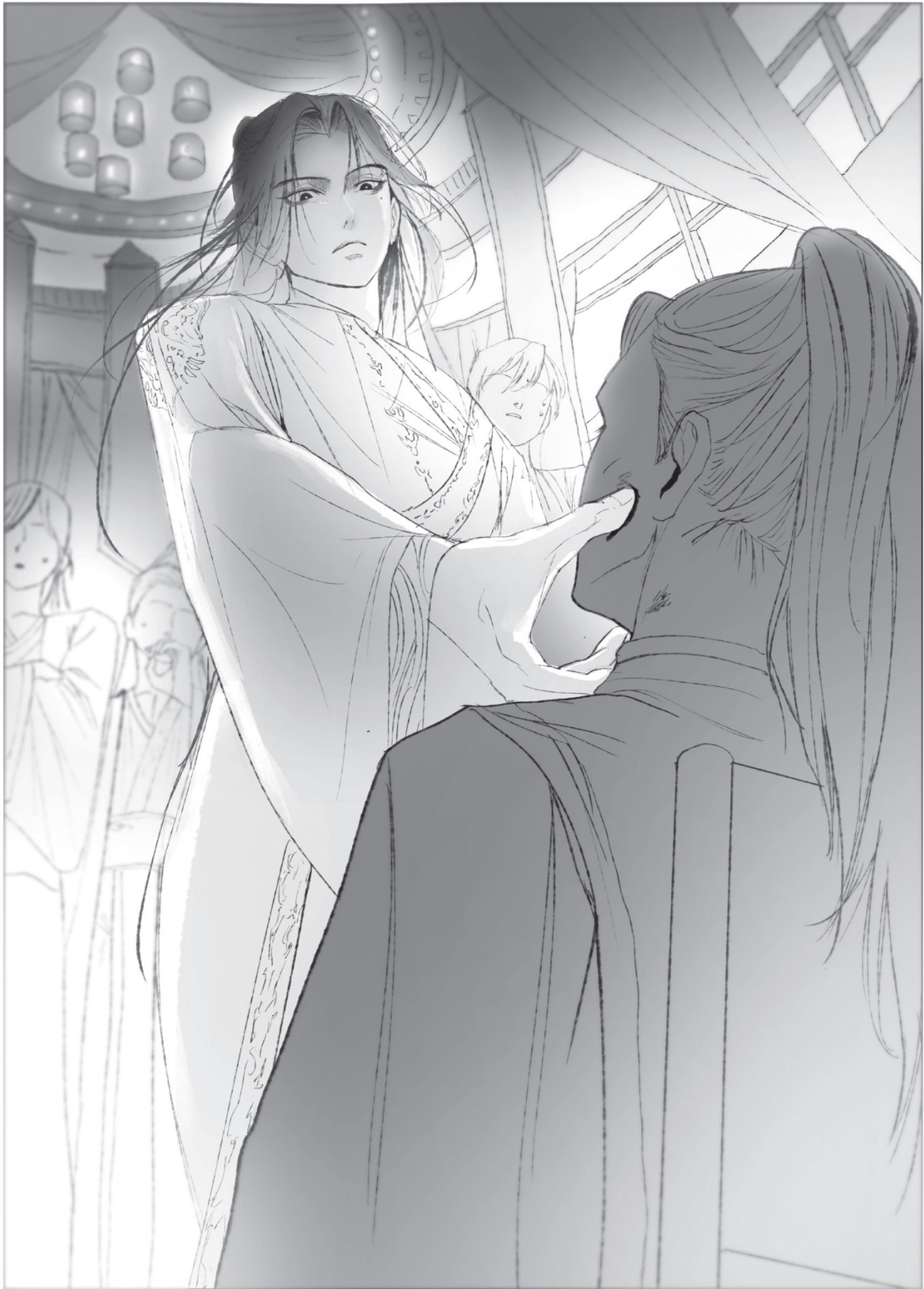
In one fluid movement, he turned and roughly grabbed Huo Wujiu's chin, lifting his face as if displaying an object. He threw an icy glance at the eunuch, a suggestive smile playing across his lips.

"Against the rules?" he said lightly. "Then tell me, what do I have here? A man or a woman?"

The swiftly approaching voices softened, indicating that the group had noticed the commotion ahead.

Jiang Suizhou's hands trembled so badly with nervous energy that he feared he might give himself away. Hopefully they'd buy it quickly and move on, and Huo Wujiu would understand this was a temporary measure, just for show.

The eunuch looked at them in stunned silence as Jiang Suizhou, in all his sinister beauty, held General Huo's jaw firmly in his delicate hand and forced the man's face up to meet his own.



General Huo kept his gaze lowered and his expression inscrutable. He said nothing, but as the prince moved his head upward, a terrible, half-healed scar became visible at his collarbone.

It stretched across his clavicle, scabbed over yet still tinged with red at the edges. Beneath the festive glow, it made for a ghastly sight.

The eunuch's legs went weak.

"N-naturally, a man," he stammered.

The Prince of Jing let out a harsh bark of laughter and abruptly flung aside Huo Wujiu's head in release.

"Exactly."

He leisurely took out a handkerchief from his sleeve and slowly, deliberately wiped the hand that had touched Huo Wujiu.

"Honestly, sending him to sit with the women... You might not be afraid of the consequences of that, but I certainly am."

His fingers were already spotless, but he meticulously wiped each one, then casually dropped the handkerchief to the ground.

"I dislike filth. You should know that," he said indifferently, lifting his gaze.

"Y-yes, that's... This is... Er..." The eunuch was at a complete loss.

Just then, Jiang Suizhou heard laughter ring out behind him.

"Who do we have here?" an imposing voice boomed. "Well, well! It's His Highness, the Prince of Jing!"

Jiang Suizhou turned around to find Pang Shao standing just a few steps behind him.

Though this old fox had long schemed against him in the court, this was the first time Jiang Suizhou had personally come face-to-face with him.

In contrast to the distorted and ugly depictions in the portraits, the old man had a composed and dignified appearance. He was dressed in his court robes, and an air of profound grandeur hung about him.

Only his eyes were deep and unfathomable, glinting with an elusive light.

Jiang Suizhou's entire body tensed.

He briefly glanced over at Pang Shao, then promptly adopted an air of disinterest.

"Minister Pang."

His behavior was extremely rude. Though he was a prince, Pang Shao was the emperor's uncle and held the rank of Grand Chancellor. In terms of status, they were nearly equal, not making mention of the immense power Pang Shao wielded.

But Jiang Suizhou knew this was the attitude the original owner of the body would have.

Sure enough, Pang Shao's expression remained amiable, showing no trace of anger. Instead, he bowed and led the surrounding officials to pay their respects to Jiang Suizhou.

"Prince of Jing. What is stalling Your Highness here?" he said, smiling.

Jiang Suizhou's expression turned even frostier. He glanced at Huo Wujiu, then quickly looked away, as if disgusted.

“Nothing,” he said as he turned slightly, like he was unwilling to discuss it further. “Please go ahead, Minister Pang.”

But Pang Shao didn’t move. Instead, he looked at the eunuch.

“It’s His Majesty’s joyous occasion. Why are you upsetting the Prince of Jing?”

The eunuch hurried forward and knelt.

“Minister Pang, it’s because His Highness wishes to bring...his companion to the banquet.”

He didn’t need to explain that, of course. Pang Shao had already witnessed Jiang Suizhou’s calculated display, exactly as intended.

He smiled and looked at Jiang Suizhou.

“Then let him. The prince and his companion are deeply devoted to each other. Are you trying to drive a wedge between them?”

He spoke slowly and chose his words very deliberately.

Jiang Suizhou’s expression immediately darkened, as if he had swallowed something vile, and he barely managed to conceal his disgust.

Even so, he couldn’t help but scoff quietly.

The eunuch did as Pang Shao instructed, bowing as he invited Jiang Suizhou to take his seat.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t spare Pang Shao another glance, seemingly disgusted by his words. He turned away with an air of arrogance.

Pang Shao stood still, watching him leave.

“The Prince of Jing is rather rude,” remarked one of the officials beside him, clearly displeased.

But Pang Shao smiled and shook his head, not the least bit offended. In fact, his eyes sparkled with satisfaction.

“His Highness is still young,” he said slowly.

The banquet hall had been set with individual tables, so there was plenty of space. Since Huo Wujiu was in a wheelchair, there was no need for another chair; an extra set of tableware sufficed.

As soon as Jiang Suizhou sat down, he turned his head and gave the general what appeared to be a cold, disdainful look.

The eunuch who had led them to their table quickly retreated.

He didn't notice that when the Prince of Jing looked at his companion, he'd whispered something only the two of them could hear: “My apologies.”

Jiang Suizhou had been so nervous during the show he put on that he was now drenched in cold sweat beneath his robes. It was nerve-racking enough trying to make it through his first face-to-face encounter with Pang Shao without slipping up, but that wasn't even the worst of it.

The things he'd just done to Huo Wujiu!

He felt like he'd pulled a tiger's whiskers, and it terrified him greatly. Therefore, he took the first available opportunity to quickly amend matters with Huo Wujiu.

Jiang Suizhou hadn't expected a response from Huo Wujiu, necessarily, and in fact he was still thinking about what further explanations

he could offer on the way back.

But then Huo Wujiu looked at him and very slowly blinked.

An acknowledgment, perhaps?

Jiang Suizhou was so startled that his cold facade almost crumbled right then and there.

He quickly looked away, picked up the tea on the table, and took a sip to calm his nerves.

That look just now... It meant "I understand" and not "I'll kill you in your sleep," surely?

Jiang Suizhou's fingers trembled slightly.

Huo Wujiu watched him thoughtfully. Buried deep within his eyes was an inscrutable emotion, almost imperceptible.

The Prince of Jing had been so composed before the crowd just moments ago, but sharing one look with Huo Wujiu had made him panic so badly he nearly fell apart. Why?

Then again, this was the first time he had seen with his own eyes how Jiang Suizhou behaved in public.

The man was a masterful actor; he'd successfully deceived even Pang Shao. The facade he'd crafted was a truly detestable and sadistic one. No wonder it made Ji Hongcheng furious enough to fill his letters with curses.

However...Huo Wujiu found it strangely endearing.

When Jiang Suizhou looked at him with those menacing, seemingly sinister eyes, Huo Wujiu instantly recognized the anxiety and helplessness the prince kept hidden behind them. It made something in his chest ache and stir in response.

Huo Wujiu involuntarily raised his hand and lightly brushed his knuckles along his chin.

A cool, soft sensation seemed to linger there.

Jiang Suizhou's hand had been trembling slightly, as if he were trying his utmost to suppress it. In attempting this gesture of humiliation and aggression, he revealed his own vulnerability. He was like a paper tiger, roaring boldly as it quivered and sought reassurance.

This incident had sorely tested Huo Wujiu's personal willpower.

Suppressing the urge to seize that hand asked more of him than any torture he'd previously endured.

Outside the hall, the rain continued to pour throughout the evening. Inside, the blazing lamplight overpowered the gloom.

Numerous high-ranking officials milled around amid the splendor of gold and jade. To an outsider, it might have appeared to be the very picture of harmony and prosperity. Surely, the court was flourishing and destined to remain so for years to come.

But Jiang Suizhou knew that this was only a facade: an illusion of opulence built on empty coffers and the plunder from surrounding regions.

Beneath it, the long unstable foundation was beginning to crumble.

Finally, as night fell, a eunuch announced the emperor's arrival. The hall immediately fell silent as everyone stood to show their respect and wait

for the emperor to take his seat on the throne. Jiang Suizhou followed their example.

Then, cued by the eunuch's call, he joined the others in kneeling thrice and prostrating himself nine times, paying homage to the emperor.

After the final bow, the officials remained kneeling, waiting for the emperor to grant them permission to rise.

The eunuch waited for a moment, horsetail whisk in hand, but heard no word from the emperor.

Well... Now what was he to do?

The eunuch seemed uneasy, his eyes darting sideways to cautiously glimpse the emperor, who lounged on the throne casually. Dressed in resplendent robes, he rested his chin on his hand and gazed thoughtfully at the crowd below.

The eunuch followed the emperor's gaze and saw, amid the sea of kneeling officials, one person sitting upright, quietly facing the emperor.

His gaze was calm and confident, directly meeting the emperor's without a trace of fear.

Huo Wujiu.

The eunuch knew this man. When he was first brought to Lin'an, the eunuch had accompanied the emperor to the dungeon. That was the first time the emperor had met him, but the man refused to kneel. Several guards tried and failed to force him, and that was when the emperor ordered his tendons severed.

There was no way this man could kneel anymore, even if he wanted to. And yet the emperor's expression suggested he was about to kick up a

fuss about it regardless.

Before the eunuch could become entirely consumed with dread, he heard the emperor's languid voice.

"Rise, my beloved subjects."

Having received the emperor's orders, the officials stood and returned to their seats.

The eunuch breathed a sigh of relief.

The current emperor's behavior was utterly preposterous at this point. During his father's reign, he had been under more pressure to curb his more outrageous impulses. But now, with the throne beneath him and the Grand Chancellor indulging him, he had become unpredictable, regardless of setting, and often caused his servants to feel on edge around him.

As long as the emperor didn't fly into a rage, the celebration should go relatively smoothly... And, well, that was the best any of them could hope for.

Just as the eunuch relaxed, the emperor spoke again.

"Hmm... Wudi," Jiang Shunheng said, resting his chin on his hand.

The banquet had not even properly begun, but he casually picked up a shrimp ball from his table and popped it into his mouth.

"All the officials knelt just now...so why didn't your companion?"

Chapter 29

JIANG SUIZHOU SILENTLY cursed him.

You must be joking. How about we break your legs and see how easily you can kneel?

He looked up at the emperor, then glanced out over the crowd. Most of the surrounding officials wore expressions of restrained amusement. The schadenfreude was obvious as they eagerly awaited the spectacle.

Watching the emperor torment him and Huo Wujiu was probably the long-awaited highlight of the entire night for them.

He paused, then rose and turned gracefully toward the emperor, bowing.

“My companion was disrespectful. I beg Huangxiong’s forgiveness,” he said.

The emperor chewed the shrimp ball idly and smiled.

“Mm, forgiven. But how do you plan to make amends?”

Jiang Suizhou glanced at Huo Wujiu beside him.

“Although this useless *invalid* can’t use his legs, I assure you that he will show his respect,” he said coldly and disdainfully, as if contaminated by something vile.

His tone was filled with impatience and loathing as he looked over his shoulder at Meng Qianshan and gave an order.

“Hurry up and drag him over. Make him kowtow to His Majesty.”

Those last few words were spat through clenched teeth and dripped with pure loathing.

It was clear that the Prince of Jing deeply despised the man who had been forced into his household.

And yet, he kept him locked up in his room to torment?

The emperor's delight only grew as he observed this.

Meng Qianshan was frozen where he stood behind the prince, too stunned to move.

He knew that His Highness had to pretend to hate Madam Huo, but surely this was going a bit too far...

What should he do?

Just then, Jiang Suizhou deliberately caught Meng Qianshan's gaze and gave him a slight frown.

"Careful with his legs," he said. "Don't let his filthy blood stain the carpet and bring bad luck to His Majesty."

There was a long-standing superstition in the Jing court regarding the spilling of blood at imperial events. If an emperor's birthday banquet were to be marred by bloodshed, it might send catastrophically bad luck his way.

And so, upon hearing this, the emperor became mildly alarmed.

"What filthy blood?" he asked immediately.

Jiang Suizhou glanced at Meng Qianshan and gave a slow blink.

"Nothing to be concerned about," he said indifferently. "As long as my servant is cautious."

Then he looked back at Meng Qianshan.

“If even a drop falls on the ground, I’ll have your head.”

Meng Qianshan jumped in fright, then met Jiang Suizhou’s gaze and understood.

Right...the prince had warned him before they left!

Meng Qianshan quickly turned and knelt before the emperor.

“Your Majesty, save me! M-Madam’s legs, you see, last night...His Highness... Oh, His Highness didn’t mean to!” he stammered in terror.

“But the wound on the madam’s leg still bleeds at the slightest touch and hasn’t scabbed over yet, so this servant doesn’t dare risk bringing bad luck to His Majesty!”

Seeing the Prince of Jing’s servant shaking like a leaf in front of the emperor, everyone in the room instantly understood the situation. Clearly, Jiang Suizhou had overdone it during yesterday’s session of torment and worsened his injuries.

The emperor felt a surge of satisfaction.

Indeed, it was as his uncle said: What was most entertaining wasn’t beating a dog, but putting two dogs in the same pen and watching them tear each other apart.

However, he couldn’t quite stomach the idea of having Huo Wujiu bleeding on the floor while kowtowing at his banquet. Not out of respect for his ancestors or anything else, but because it was inauspicious. He feared it might shorten his lifespan.

But he couldn’t let the matter of respect go unaddressed.

The emperor’s smile deepened, and his gaze shifted between Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu. Finally, it settled on Jiang Suizhou.

“Then forget it. This isn’t the time or place for such a disgusting display,” he said. “I’m not an unreasonable man.”

Inwardly, Jiang Suizhou breathed a sigh of relief. Externally, he assumed a haughty expression tinged with dissatisfaction at both his servant’s insubordination and the lost opportunity to humiliate Huo Wujiu. He even glared coldly at Huo Wujiu to really sell it.

But before he could relax in full, the emperor spoke again.

“However, since he is your concubine, the two of you could be considered of one heart, mind, and body, correct?”

Jiang Suizhou looked up at the emperor, who smiled smugly back at him.

“You can kneel on his behalf.”

All the officials in the hall were seated, their eyes fixed on him.

Apparently, the emperor intended to turn his disappointment into an opportunity to escalate things. If he couldn’t degrade Huo Wujiu, then Jiang Suizhou was a perfectly acceptable substitute.

Jiang Suizhou took a deep breath and clenched his teeth.

He’d just known this dim-witted emperor, under Pang Shao’s instructions, wouldn’t let the matter rest so easily.

Whatever. It didn’t matter anymore. After all the humiliation he’d endured for Huo Wujiu in front of the emperor, one more kowtow was just another drop in the bucket.

He made sure to show his reluctance clearly on his face as he looked at the emperor, waiting for him to force the issue so he could grudgingly perform the kowtow and be done with it.

But at that moment, a deep voice broke the silence in the hall.

“Who gave him the right to kneel in my stead?”

The words carried a hint of disdain.

Jiang Suizhou froze.

What was Huo Wujiu doing?!

He turned back in surprise. Every eye in the hall fell onto Huo Wujiu, who lifted his head to fearlessly meet the emperor’s gaze from afar.

As he offered the emperor a languid yet provocative smirk, it felt like sunlight piercing through a deep valley. He sat upright and self-assured, with the air of a battle flag being unfurled, a beacon blazing atop city walls.

This was Huo Wujiu’s true self—bold, proud, endlessly radiant.

Jiang Suizhou heard Huo Wujiu continue.

“As a subject, I, Huo Wujiu, kneel only to my own sovereign,” he said slowly. “What right does the Prince of Jing have to kneel in my stead?”

The upward inflection of his tone could even be described as haughty.

The emperor’s eyes widened in anger.

“Your sovereign?” he said through clenched teeth. “The Huo family has always belonged to Great Jing. You are *my* watchdogs! Tell me, who is your sovereign?”

Huo Wujiu chuckled as if hearing a joke, then shook his head.

Jiang Suizhou had never seen him truly smile before. It was wild and dazzling, like sunlight reflecting brilliantly off a blade buried in sand.

“Even if the Huo family are watchdogs, we are no longer yours to command. As our ancestral teachings say, ‘Guard the north against foreign

enemies, defend Yecheng,’” he said defiantly. “Your Majesty, the one who lost Yecheng three years ago was your father.”

The emperor trembled with rage.

How dare he?! The brutes who’d captured Yecheng were the traitorous and disloyal Huo family!

This was a blatant slap in the face. If the emperor had his way, then Huo Wujiu would have been immediately dragged away, cut into pieces, and fed to the dogs.

But he couldn’t do that. His uncle had said this man was still useful and needed to be kept alive. Besides, he couldn’t torment a dead man. The only way he could inflict the suffering Huo Wujiu deserved was by allowing him to live.

And so, though the emperor’s eyes bulged with fury, he forced himself to take a few deep breaths before he looked to Pang Shao for help.

Watching this exchange, Jiang Suizhou stood beneath the steps, doing his best not to smile.

Since the emperor had spared Huo Wujiu’s life once, he was unlikely to take it so impulsively. Jiang Suizhou knew this, but he hadn’t anticipated that Huo Wujiu would leverage this fact to openly challenge the emperor during the banquet.

So, Huo Wujiu was this good at provoking people, huh? No wonder he was usually so quiet—he was hiding his true power!

As satisfying as it was to witness, Jiang Suizhou knew he had to say something. If he remained silent, he would relinquish control of the situation to the emperor. Even if he didn’t kill Huo Wujiu, things wouldn’t end well for him today in that case either.

Jiang Suizhou grabbed a jade cup from the table and slammed it onto the table in front of Huo Wujiu.

A small jade cup was rather harmless, but the sharp sound of it shattering against the table corner was enough to startle everyone nearby.

Jiang Suizhou turned to Huo Wujiu, his expression dark and filled with poorly suppressed rage.

“How wonderful,” he said, his voice quivering faintly from attempting to contain the fury within his frail body. “It seems you need yet another lesson in how to keep your mouth shut.”

He enunciated each word very deliberately and spat them with such venom that it sent a chill through the entire crowd.

By all appearances, it seemed that if this hadn’t been the emperor’s birthday banquet, the enraged Prince of Jing would have lunged forward and strangled Huo Wujiu right then and there.

When the emperor saw this, his anger subsided slightly.

Right, there was still the Prince of Jing. He didn’t need to dirty his hands and ruin the festive atmosphere. The prince was sure to make his quarters a living hell for Huo Wujiu once they returned to their residence, in light of his loose, insolent tongue.

Below the tall dais, his uncle also gave him a slight shake of the head, signaling for him to quell his anger and not explode.

The emperor gritted his teeth and forced out a few words.

“How disappointing,” he said. “Enough of this; I’m hungry. Let the banquet begin.”

Without missing a beat, the officials lifted their cups, as though nothing had happened. The music resumed, flooding the hall with a melody both majestic and serene, as if it were striving to dispel the earlier tension.

The emperor downed a cup of wine.

Something felt wrong.

Though it was always entertaining to watch dogs tear each other apart... Why did it feel like when these two snapped at each other, he ended up gaining nothing?

Jiang Suizhou could vaguely understand why Huo Wujiu had done what he did, but he still felt a bit incredulous nonetheless.

He could never have guessed that Huo Wujiu would be willing to take such a great risk just to stop him from kowtowing alone to the emperor.

Huo Wujiu must have known better than him that the emperor was a scoundrel with no regard for propriety or occasion. Had he been hit with a burst of fury, the emperor could have had him hauled back to the dungeon before the entire assembly of civil and military officials, to be flayed and dismembered.

Jiang Suizhou was somewhat shaken by this realization, but he didn't dare glance at Huo Wujiu again.

At this moment, he needed to maintain his cold, arrogant demeanor and ignore Huo Wujiu completely. He barely touched the dishes on his table and only sipped some wine from time to time.

The officials in the hall also didn't dare to approach him. When they toasted each other, they deliberately avoided Jiang Suizhou's table.

This, in turn, saved Jiang Suizhou a lot of trouble.

Outside, the rain continued to patter, showing no sign of letting up. Amid the flickering lights and the clinking of cups, the feasting and toasting continued. Gradually, everyone began to show signs of drunkenness.

Some ministers started to step forward to toast the emperor.

Jiang Suizhou sat at his table, idly listening to their extravagant birthday wishes. He occasionally stole glances at Huo Wujiu out of the corner of his eye, his mind involuntarily replaying the earlier events.

A voice from the front of the hall drifted into Jiang Suizhou's ear.

The man speaking was quite eloquent. He'd been rambling forever, and still he'd yet to finish his birthday wishes. Surprised, Jiang Suizhou deigned to turn his attention to him for a moment.

...Chen Ti?

It was the man who'd had his wife invite Huo Wujiu to the flower viewing.

Jiang Suizhou picked up his teacup and took a sip.

The man was truly a master of flattery. No wonder he'd thrived in a court beneath the thumb of Pang Shao.

Chen Ti drained his cup, then continued with his speech.

"Your Majesty, today is a joyous occasion. I would like to humbly ask for a favor," he said with a smile.

"What is it?" said the emperor. "Speak."

Chen Ti smiled, cup in hand.

“A few days ago, my wife sent an invitation to the Prince of Jing’s residence, inviting Madam Huo to a flower-viewing banquet. But Madam Huo is new to the capital and still a little reserved, so he declined the invitation.”

As he spoke, he turned and looked toward Jiang Suizhou’s table.

“My wife was afraid she might offend His Highness the Prince of Jing, so she specifically requested that I seek His Majesty’s approval. We wish to invite Madam Huo to the flower-viewing banquet at my modest residence in half a month’s time.”

Chapter 30

JIANG SUIZHOU SPENT MUCH of the carriage ride back to the residence stone-faced and obviously displeased.

He hadn't expected Chen Ti to be so desperate to suck up to the emperor and Pang Shao that he'd stoop to such shameless tactics.

Inviting Huo Wujiu to view some flowers was just a pretext; his real goal was to make up for the show of disgrace the emperor had suffered at their hands during the banquet. Truly, he'd do anything to ingratiate himself with the emperor.

After all, Chen Ti had always been one of Pang Shao's followers. He wasn't a high-ranking minister, so he rarely had the opportunity to stand out in front of the emperor. Jiang Suizhou rejecting his invitation had inadvertently given Chen Ti the perfect opportunity to delight the emperor.

Sure enough, the emperor agreed without hesitation, giving Jiang Suizhou no chance to refuse. He even promoted Chen Ti on the spot, granting him a lucrative position.

Everyone at the banquet rejoiced, except for Jiang Suizhou, whose previously feigned icy fury had turned much more genuine.

By the time the palace banquet ended, the rain outside poured relentlessly. Powerful winds surged about the carriage, the brocade curtains flapping noisily and allowing a few droplets to seep through and find their way inside.

In just a short while, half of Jiang Suizhou's shoulder was soaked, but he seemed oblivious, his cold gaze fixed on the window.

Although this palace banquet hadn't been a trap per se, these people were eager to make him and Huo Wujiu their entertainment for the evening. While it had been impossible to avoid becoming a spectacle, let alone evade all the hidden arrows, being manipulated by such an obsequious sycophant left Jiang Suizhou feeling profoundly bitter.

Most importantly...what about Huo Wujiu?

He no longer needed to fear incurring Huo Wujiu's wrath, but he'd grown accustomed to being conscientious toward him. This matter had nothing to do with him, really, but Jiang Suizhou still felt irritable and restless.

A cold gust of wind streamed in, causing him to shiver.

His throat itched, a cough forming inside his lungs.

Just then, something soft and heavy was draped over him. The warmth of another person's body carried within instantly enveloped him.

Startled, he looked up to see Huo Wujiu sitting silently beside him. He was no longer wearing his cloak.

"You..." Jiang Suizhou trailed off.

He began to remove the cloak so he could return it to Huo Wujiu, who was now a bit too lightly dressed for the weather.

However, he was immediately interrupted.

"You just recovered from your illness," Huo Wujiu said.

"Huh?"

Jiang Suizhou clutched awkwardly at the cloak. Huo Wujiu turned his head a little to look at him properly.

"Keep it on," he said.

Jiang Suizhou nodded and pulled the cloak tighter around himself.

Before his transmigration, he'd been strong and healthy for over twenty years, so he often forgot how sickly he had now become. Surprisingly, Huo Wujiu seemed to remember it better than he did.

Huo Wujiu watched as Jiang Suizhou obediently snuggled into his cloak. Then he reached over and tucked the edges in neatly before turning back, satisfied.

Jiang Suizhou looked at him.

Something didn't look right about his complexion. His lips had been pale when they arrived, and now they looked even more ashen.

"...Aren't you cold?" Jiang Suizhou ventured.

Huo Wujiu scoffed lightly and glanced at him askance. "You call this weather cold?"

This was nothing compared to winter in Yangguan, where the snow would fall so heavily throughout the night that it would pile up and block the entrances to their tents. They had to dig and kick their way through just to get out.

His subtle sideways glance and arched eyebrow revealed a rarely shown youthful, almost playful side to him. It was similar to the air he'd put on in the hall earlier, but without the aggression. It definitely retained a hint of the same pride, though.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but chuckle softly and ensconce himself further within the cloak about him.

"Fine. As long as you're not cold," he said.

When Huo Wujiu saw Jiang Suizhou smile, his gaze faltered. He quickly looked away, but not without glancing back a couple more times.

In the dim light of the carriage, Jiang Suizhou didn't see that the robe draped over Huo Wujiu's legs was already soaked through from the rain. The moisture seeped into his wounds, sending a sharp, stabbing pain deep into bone, so intense that he couldn't stop his legs from trembling.

But the movement of the carriage concealed this too.

It was better that Jiang Suizhou failed to notice these things.

Taking off the cloak and wrapping it around Huo Wujiu's legs might have eased the pain, but he couldn't bring himself to let that frail rabbit shiver in the cold. Pain was something Huo Wujiu knew how to endure. However, if the Prince of Jing fell ill again and developed a fever, he'd suffer quite a bit. Moreover, he'd likely have to take more of that bitter medicine he so loathed. He might even cry about it a little.

In any case, Huo Wujiu had managed to draw a charming smile from Jiang Suizhou just now. That made it worthwhile.

Jiang Suizhou slept lightly that night.

After returning to his room, changing his clothes, and lying down, he remained preoccupied with the day's events. As he pondered, the sound of the heavy rain outside lulled him into a tenuous and hazy sleep.

He was awakened by the sound of something small falling to the ground.

Beyond the bed curtains, the dim glow of a night lamp was periodically overpowered by flashes of lightning outside the window. When Jiang Suizhou looked toward the window, he saw a tall silhouette struggling to sit up from the bed, apparently straining to pick something up.

“What’s wrong?” Jiang Suizhou asked groggily.

Huo Wujiu didn’t respond.

Jiang Suizhou hurriedly got out of bed, slipped into his shoes, and walked over to the daybed.

By the time he reached him, Huo Wujiu finally seemed to notice that Jiang Suizhou was awake. Huo Wujiu’s brows were tightly furrowed as he looked up at him.

“Did I wake you?” Huo Wujiu asked, his voice low and hoarse.

A thin layer of sweat coated his forehead, dampening the hair at his temples. His complexion was pallid enough to set off alarm bells in Jiang Suizhou’s mind.

“What’s wrong?” Jiang Suizhou repeated, now with more concern.

Huo Wujiu raised a trembling hand to rub his temple. He seemed almost dazed from pain.

Jiang Suizhou had never seen him in such a state—not even when he’d been newly released from prison, covered with infected wounds and burning with fever.

“Where does it hurt? I’ll have Meng Qianshan call a doctor!”

Huo Wujiu shook his head.

“It’s nothing, just the rain. Makes my legs ache a bit.”

He seemed unaware of how wretched he looked at that moment. Despite his misery, he was still trying to tough it out.

“My medicine fell to the floor,” he added. “Just help me pick it up.”

At the mention of medicine, Jiang Suizhou leaped into action. He bent to retrieve a small bottle that had fallen just a few steps away and handed it back to Huo Wujiu. It was fortunate that the bottle seemed to be crafted from a sturdy material and hadn’t shattered from the impact.

Huo Wujiu’s hand trembled as he slowly tipped out a pill. He swallowed it, then tucked the bottle into his robe and closed his eyes, ready to lie back down.

It seemed he was planning to go back to sleep.

Jiang Suizhou was stunned.

“What kind of medicine is this?” he probed.

Logically, before being captured, Huo Wujiu couldn’t have known that his legs would be broken, so why would he have been carrying medicine for his legs on him?

Huo Wujiu frowned and opened his eyes again.

He was in so much pain that his head was spinning. His vision was swimming, and he couldn’t even feel his own trembling, but he still knew the culprit behind this torment.

It was, of course, his damaged meridians. This kind of pain was unavoidable on rainy days, particularly in the humid climate of Jiangnan. It was far from pleasant, but it wasn’t life-threatening. He assumed it would ease once the rain let up, and so he intended to endure it in silence.

And yet the Prince of Jing acted as though this were a matter of life and death. Huo Wujiu himself didn't think it was a big deal, so why was the prince so worked up?

"It's medicine that won't kill me," he answered wryly.

The corners of Huo Wujiu's mouth twitched slightly. Though his voice was hoarse, his tone was nonchalant.

However, Jiang Suizhou's eyes widened when he heard this.

*You're in that much pain, and you're taking random medicine?
You're just asking for trouble!*

"Nonsense!" he blurted, then turned and rushed out of the room.
"Meng Qianshan!"

Huo Wujiu was slumped on the daybed. He faintly heard Jiang Suizhou's anxious voice amid the ringing in his ears.

Tsk, so much fuss over nothing.

"Really making a mountain out of a molehill..." he muttered to nobody in particular.

It was rather annoying for Huo Wujiu to be doted on like this. Still, for some reason, the tiniest of smiles crept its way onto his face.

Though the rain fell in endless cold sheets, the lamps within Anyin Hall cast their warm glow over Huo Wujiu as Physician Zhou began his examination.

He took Huo Wujiu's pulse and carefully inspected his injuries before eventually standing up to give his diagnosis.

"How is he?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

"Your Highness, Madam Huo's condition is a result of his damaged meridians," Physician Zhou said with a bow. "On cold and rainy days, the pain can be excruciating."

Jiang Suizhou frowned. "Is there any way to treat it?"

The physician shook his head.

"The only cure would be the full restoration of the meridians in Madam Huo's legs...but those meridians are completely and irreparably severed. Recovery is impossible."

Jiang Suizhou's frown deepened.

He knew that this diagnosis was not entirely correct. Huo Wujiu's legs could be healed, but the doctors in his residence lacked the skills to do it. At first, Jiang Suizhou had figured it would be fine to put that issue on the back burner, as long as that one physician who could cure him showed up within three years.

However, he hadn't realized how unbearable those three years would be for Huo Wujiu. A bit of rain was enough to cause him this much pain? Considering the climate of Lin'an, wouldn't the next three years be absolute torture?

He fell silent for a moment. The physician carefully watched his expression.

"However, keeping Madam Huo's legs warm with quilts and hot water bottles can provide some relief," he offered cautiously.

Hearing this, Jiang Suizhou immediately ordered Meng Qianshan to prepare these items at once.

Meng Qianshan quickly complied, and he in turn directed the maids to get to work.

Physician Zhou took his leave. The maids soon returned with thick quilts and covered Huo Wujiu's legs.

"Does that feel better?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

On the daybed, Huo Wujiu looked at Jiang Suizhou.

The Prince of Jing was still clad in his sleeping robes, with only a jacket draped over top, as he sat in a chair by his bed.

It was late at night, and he appeared a little listless. Fatigue was etched on his face, and he looked pale. Worried he might catch a chill, Meng Qianshan had thoughtfully prepared a hot water bottle to warm his hands. Now, he sat there absentmindedly squeezing the soft, warm object, a frown on his face as he gazed at Huo Wujiu.

As for the quilt... Truthfully, Huo Wujiu didn't feel much of a difference. The clearest sensation was only that it was heavy.

Since his legs had been maimed, his blood circulation within them had become poor, and they were often cold. Even with the quilt, it was hard to warm them up. Moreover, the moisture in the humid air easily penetrated the flimsy satin and cotton barrier of the quilt.

However, for some reason, he didn't want to see the Prince of Jing disappointed.

"It's somewhat better now," he lied.

Sure enough, those fox-like eyes lit up instantly.

Next, the Prince of Jing seemed to realize what he was holding in his hand. He looked down at the hot water bottle. It was white and made of rabbit fur—soft and fluffy, almost like holding a real little rabbit.

He watched as Jiang Suizhou carefully lifted the blanket and tucked the rabbitlike water bottle next to his leg.

Then, he paused, as if thinking of something else.

The next thing Huo Wujiu knew, the Prince of Jing's hand landed clumsily on his leg beneath the blanket. His warm hand, heated by the hot water bottle he'd been toying with, gently rubbed up and down over the thin fabric of Huo Wujiu's sleepwear, then slowly kneaded the muscle a few times.

"Does this...feel better?" he heard the Prince of Jing ask, but Huo Wujiu couldn't answer him right away.

Despite the extensive injuries inflicted upon his legs, they weren't completely numb.

He certainly felt something, but could it be classified as "better" by whatever metric the prince was using? It was hard to tell because of the way it sent a surge of electricity up his leg to briefly wipe every thought from his mind.

Chapter 31

THE ONLY THING that Jiang Suizhou noticed was how Huo Wujiu's leg felt like a block of ice beneath his hand. He was fully oblivious to any reaction he might have elicited.

Tentatively, he rubbed the leg a few times, then firmly kneaded it a little more. The muscles under his palm were taut, and it took considerable effort to massage them. However, as he continued, Huo Wujiu's leg did seem to warm up a bit.

"Is this any better?" he asked, looking up at Huo Wujiu with bright eyes.

Huo Wujiu didn't reply. He simply continued to sit there, silent and unmoving. His expressionless face was like a mask.

All right, so...does it feel better or not?

Jiang Suizhou was out of ideas, so he gave the leg a few more kneads for good measure.

Abruptly, Huo Wujiu seized his wrist and yanked it out from beneath the blanket.

Jiang Suizhou looked up, startled, to find Huo Wujiu staring at him. His dark eyes were cold and searching.

"What are you doing?" Huo Wujiu demanded with a frown.

Jiang Suizhou quickly withdrew his hand in alarm.

He'd only tried massaging his leg a few times because he thought it might help. Why was Huo Wujiu so angry?

Realization dawned on Jiang Suizhou in an instant.

Of course... Huo Wujiu probably didn't like having people touch his legs. He was likely a bit sensitive about them, being so recently disabled.

Somewhat flustered, Jiang Suizhou silently kicked himself for crossing such a line without even thinking. Meanwhile, Huo Wujiu struggled to prop himself up on the bed. He kept his body turned slightly away.

Just then, the group of maids Meng Qianshan had led to fetch hot water bottles returned to the bedside. They tucked the warm, fluffy masses into his blanket before retreating.

Jiang Suizhou rose.

"...I'm sorry," he said after a pause. "I shouldn't have touched your leg just now."

On the daybed, Huo Wujiu opened his mouth as if to say something, but no words came out. After a moment, he lowered his eyes.

"It's fine," he said softly. "Go to sleep."

Hearing this, Jiang Suizhou breathed a sigh of relief.

Huo Wujiu's tone was still quite stern. But he'd assured Jiang Suizhou that it was fine, so he probably wasn't going to hold it against him...right?

He didn't care if others were upset with him, but this man was different. After all, when this man was angered, lives would be at stake.

At the thought, Jiang Suizhou gave his acknowledgment. He was about to return to his own bed when he paused and doubled back once more.

“This daybed is a bit too close to the window. Why don’t you sleep on the bed?”

Huo Wujiu simply closed his eyes and didn’t respond.

This meant he didn’t want to move.

Although Jiang Suizhou was still worried, he couldn’t force him to move to the bed. At least the blankets on him were nice and thick. That should keep him warm enough, so Jiang Suizhou didn’t insist.

He returned to his bed, took off the jacket, and lay back down under the covers.

“If the pain comes back, just call for me,” he reminded Huo Wujiu quietly.

Huo Wujiu didn’t respond.

Already used to having one-sided conversations with this block of wood, Jiang Suizhou simply closed his eyes again.

Huo Wujiu remained motionless on the daybed until Jiang Suizhou’s breathing became steady enough to indicate that he was asleep. Only then did Huo Wujiu lift the blanket covering his legs and pull out the pile of hot water bottles.

They were large and heavy, like little stoves. Were they trying to cook his legs through?

It was definitely that idiot Meng Qianshan’s doing.

Huo Wujiu didn’t want to admit it, but not even a hundred hot water bottles packed under the thickest quilts could compare to the warmth of the hand that had clumsily massaged his leg earlier.

But that touch had elicited complicated sensations as well—sensations that left him feeling so disconcerted that he desperately needed to escape.

So disconcerted, in fact, that he'd startled the Prince of Jing quite badly.

Huo Wujiu's expression was dark as he began tossing out the hot water bottles from under his blanket.

Until he touched something soft and fluffy.

It was the water bottle Jiang Suizhou had tucked in earlier.

His hand paused, sparing the little white rabbit. Then he pulled the blanket back over himself, allowing the small thing to nestle by his leg, gently radiating warmth into his body.

But it still felt like something was missing.

After a moment, Huo Wujiu tentatively reached under the blanket, placed his hand on his own leg, and rubbed it a few times.

...Completely useless.

Chapter 32

THE RAIN PERSISTED until it finally cleared on the dawn of a new day.

Jiang Suizhou slept peacefully through the night.

When he woke up early in the morning, he saw that the clouds had completely dispersed. Sunlight illuminated the clear blue sky, and the glow filtered through the window, crisp and bright.

Jiang Suizhou's gaze immediately fell on the daybed by the window.

It was empty. Huo Wujiu was sitting in the wheelchair beside it, adjusting his robes.

"Do your legs still hurt?" Jiang Suizhou asked, his voice hoarse from sleep.

"I'm fine," Huo Wujiu said, glancing up at Jiang Suizhou.

As he spoke, he picked up a white object from the daybed and tossed it over.

Jiang Suizhou fumbled to catch the flying object sailing toward him. But the thing was too velvety and slipped right through his hands, landing gently on his bed.

Looking down, Jiang Suizhou identified it as the hot water bottle Meng Qianshan had given him yesterday.

The hot water inside had long cooled, but the fur on the outside still carried a faint warmth, as if it'd retained someone's body heat.

"Thank you," Huo Wujiu said flatly.

Oh, for the hot water bottle.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but smile slightly.

He'd always maintained that the great General Huo was truly a good, upstanding person. Meng Qianshan had given him so many hot water bottles yesterday, yet he still remembered the specific one Jiang Suizhou had lent him. He even made a point to thank him for it.

"Of course," Jiang Suizhou said, his voice tinged with amusement.

Huo Wujiu glanced at him indifferently, then looked away.

The sun rose higher, and Jiang Suizhou got out of bed.

Although the emperor's birthday banquet was finished and today was a day off for the officials, the Ministry of Rites couldn't take a break. There was still so much that needed to be organized and documented after the big event.

Ji You had offered to excuse Jiang Suizhou due to his poor health, but Jiang Suizhou didn't want to make an exception for himself. He planned to go and see if there was anything he could do to pitch in.

As he thought about this, he also remembered the books Ji You had lent him a while ago.

Two volumes of nonstandard history, neither of them very thick. By his calculations, it was about time to return them to Ji You.

Just as he stood to call Meng Qianshan in and inform him of his plans, someone pushed the door open in a terrible hurry.

Meng Qianshan stumbled in, panicked and out of breath.

"Your Highness, something's happened!" Meng Qianshan said urgently.

Jiang Suizhou frowned. “What is it?”

“The Ministry of Rites is in trouble! I’ve received word that Minister Ji has been impeached and taken away by the Ministry of Justice!”

Jiang Suizhou froze.

“On what charges?”

This wasn’t right. Ji You’s life story was a known part of the historical record. Jiang Suizhou knew how the man’s story went, and there shouldn’t have been such an incident. Although Ji You’s lifetime accomplishments were largely unremarkable, so too were his troubles. After the fall of the Jing dynasty, Northern Liang tried to recruit him, but he refused and retired to the countryside to enjoy a life of leisure.

Why had he suddenly been arrested?

“The officials from the Ministry of Justice said that Minister Ji embezzled funds from the emperor’s birthday banquet. They say that he used inferior materials and cut corners. It was discovered this morning!”

That was even more impossible.

Jiang Suizhou frowned. “Has he already been taken to the Ministry of Justice?”

Meng Qianshan nodded hard.

“Help me get dressed,” Jiang Suizhou said, his expression serious.

“Your Highness, what are you...”

“I’m going to the Ministry of Justice.”

“What are you planning to do?” Meng Qianshan asked, tapping his foot nervously. “All the other officials in the Ministry of Rites are avoiding

the place, afraid the authorities will come knocking. Why are you rushing over there?"

"Enough," Jiang Suizhou snapped. "Don't waste my time."

Meng Qianshan didn't dare to disobey and quickly helped him change into his robes.

Jiang Suizhou's gaze was dark.

Now that this fire had broken out, they would surely interrogate all the other officials in the Ministry of Rites after arresting Ji You. As an imperial prince, it wouldn't be out of line for him to head over and clear his name first. It wouldn't raise any suspicions.

But he wasn't actually going there to clear his name.

He wanted to know why Ji You, who shouldn't have gotten into any trouble, had been arrested.

Was it because everything here was off the record and unofficial history, so it differed from the official accounts? Or was it because he, having traveled through time, had interacted with Ji You and become a variable in his life?

The news of Jiang Suizhou's plans to visit to the Ministry of Justice had already spread. When he got out of the carriage, the Vice Minister of Justice was waiting for him at the entrance.

He even greeted him with a smile, and, noticing how unsteady and frail Jiang Suizhou seemed, he reached out to help him exit the carriage.

Jiang Suizhou snubbed the gesture, sidestepping him. He let Meng Qianshan steady him instead.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Your Highness,” the Vice Minister of Justice said as he politely stepped aside. “Please, come in.”

“Our ranks are the same. There’s no need for such formalities,” Jiang Suizhou said tersely. “Besides, I’m here today to be interrogated.”

The Vice Minister of Justice laughed.

“Your Highness, what are you saying? We know you’ve been ill recently and had no part in this. Any potential investigation won’t involve you...”

Jiang Suizhou raised his hand to stop him.

“There are some things I’ve handled personally,” he said calmly. “Whether you investigate or not, I need to talk to him myself.”

Hearing this, the Vice Minister of Justice nodded and led him inside.

The allegations put forth were simple: a cut-and-dried case of embezzlement. The funds allocated to the Ministry of Rites had been approved by the Ministry of Revenue, and everything was properly recorded in the accounts. But during the cleanup this morning, someone had discovered that many of the banquet’s decorations were of inferior quality, substituted by metals and minerals that were neither gold nor jade, and there was a significant discrepancy in the funds.

“By our calculations, Ji You must have embezzled roughly...” The Vice Minister of Justice held up four fingers as he trailed off.

“Just say it. Don’t play games with me,” Jiang Suizhou said coldly.

“At least four thousand taels,” he clarified awkwardly.

Four thousand taels wasn't an enormous amount, but embezzling from the emperor's birthday banquet at all was a serious offense. For an ordinary official, it could mean exile or even execution.

Jiang Suizhou didn't say anything. After a moment, the Vice Minister of Justice continued.

"Your Highness, there's no need to worry. Even if the Ministry of Justice investigates your residence, it'll be a simple routine check. This matter mainly involves Ji You and has nothing to do with..."

"I need to see Ji You," Jiang Suizhou cut in.

The Vice Minister of Justice froze. He looked troubled.

"Well... The thing is, Ji You is currently in custody," he said hesitantly.

Jiang Suizhou's expression was calm.

"I handled a batch of materials," he said. "I need to ask him about it privately to relieve my doubts."

Hearing this, the Vice Minister of Justice seemed to understand.

Ji You had embezzled, but it seemed the Prince of Jing wasn't entirely innocent either.

It was highly probable that the Prince of Jing wasn't entirely blameless regarding His Majesty's birthday banquet. This explained why he'd hurried over so urgently and even sought to interrogate Ji You in private.

The Vice Minister of Justice had already received orders from above to deal with Ji You. If the Prince of Jing wanted to shift some of the blame onto Ji You, it wouldn't be a big deal.

After all, the Prince of Jing was a member of the royal family. Even if he embezzled a bit of silver, what could the emperor say?

With this in mind, the Vice Minister of Justice reluctantly agreed and led Jiang Suizhou to the Ministry of Justice's prison.

The prison primarily housed suspects awaiting investigation or those charged with minor offenses. Its conditions were better than those of the imperial prison, and it wasn't as heavily guarded. The cells even had small windows that allowed light and ventilation.

Jiang Suizhou followed the Vice Minister of Justice deep into the prison. After turning a corner, he saw Ji You in his cell.

Having just been imprisoned, he still wore tidy robes, and he looked relatively composed, seated alone on a straw-covered cot in the cell.

Noticing his approaching form, Ji You looked up.

Jiang Suizhou stopped at the cell door and gestured for the Vice Minister of Justice to wait outside.

"But..." The Vice Minister of Justice hesitated.

"Fifteen minutes," Jiang Suizhou insisted.

The Vice Minister of Justice hesitated for a moment, a troubled expression on his face, but he soon relented.

"Then please keep it brief, Your Highness. I'll wait for you at the prison entrance."

Ji You was already imprisoned, after all. Surely the Prince of Jing didn't have anything too significant to discuss with him at this point. Besides, the Vice Minister of Justice was a lower-ranking official without

powerful backers. It wasn't worth it to offend the Prince of Jing over such a minor issue.

The Vice Minister of Justice retreated.

Once he was out of earshot, Jiang Suizhou stepped forward.

"Minister Ji."

Ji You stood up from the bed and walked to the cell door, where he stared in disbelief at Jiang Suizhou through the iron bars.

"Your Highness...?"

Jiang Suizhou paused.

"I...originally planned to return your books today."

This stunned Ji You into silence for a moment. Then he laughed dryly.

"Your Highness, there's no need to return them," he said. "The heavens are unpredictable, and everyone has their own fate. It seems my fate has led me here."

Jiang Suizhou felt a pang of sadness seeing Ji You like this.

"Although we're not close, I know you're not the type to do such a thing," he said after a pause, his voice firm.

"If the evidence is solid, it doesn't matter whether I did it or not," Ji You said.

Jiang Suizhou wasn't sure what to say. After a moment, Ji You continued.

"Your Highness has always been at odds with Pang Shao's faction. You can probably guess what's going on. Members of Pang Shao's faction have repeatedly tried to win me over, but I've refused each time. They must

have been displeased, particularly with my recent interactions with Your Highness. They're likely taking precautions."

His tone was calm; there wasn't a hint of accusation in his voice, but Jiang Suizhou's hands clenched tighter at his sides.

...He had guessed as much.

Though Ji You may not have blamed him, Jiang Suizhou blamed himself. He knew something that Ji You didn't—that his mere presence was a life-altering calamity for Ji You.

Ji You wanted to remain neutral, and since he didn't hold any real power, Pang Shao paid him no attention. There was no reason for concern, as the original Prince of Jing had no real connection to Ji You beyond the simple fact that they both worked at the Ministry of Rites.

However, since Jiang Suizhou had traveled through time to take the prince's place, the relationship between the Prince of Jing and Minister Ji had changed. A few casual chats caused Ji You to offer the frail prince a handful of kind accommodations for his poor health. They could have been considered acquaintances at best, really, but that was all it took for Pang Shao to become wary enough to necessitate the elimination of Ji You.

Seeing Jiang Suizhou's silence, Ji You was a little taken aback. But then he smiled gently.

"Your Highness, there's no need to blame yourself," Ji You said. "I knew this day would come, from the moment I first refused to join their faction. I'm a lazy man with little talent. I've spent over a decade in this position, yet I've accomplished nothing because I wished to stay uninvolved with political schemes while serving in the court. It's not Your Highness's fault that I've ended up like this."

But Jiang Suizhou, who had been silent for a long time, shook his head.

He looked up at Ji You with those dark, slightly upturned eyes that normally gave the impression of a cunning fox. But now, gazing resolutely through the cell bars, they shone with fierce brilliance.

“The matter hasn’t been fully investigated yet,” Jiang Suizhou insisted firmly. “You won’t be convicted right away.”

Ji You could hear the natural charisma still dripping from his lowered voice.

“Please remain calm while in prison, Minister Ji. I swear I won’t let you suffer an unjust fate.”

The sky gradually darkened, and rain drizzled down outside.

Meng Qianshan paced back and forth at the entrance of Anyin Hall, feeling uneasy. He repeatedly sent servants to the gate to check if the prince had returned.

That morning, His Highness had asked him to accompany him to the Ministry of Justice. His Highness had been silent on the ride back from the prison. He seemed moody, his face dark and expressionless.

When they reached Changping Street, about a third of a mile away from Qinghe Ward, the Prince of Jing ordered the carriage to stop and got out on his own.

“Don’t let anyone follow me,” he’d instructed. “I just want to take a walk. I’ll return to the residence shortly.”

Meng Qianshan wanted to dissuade him, but seeing Jiang Suizhou’s cold expression, he didn’t dare to speak.

Feeling he had no choice in the matter, Meng Qianshan helped Jiang Suizhou out of the carriage and sent two guards to follow him from a distance.

But that was hours ago, and he hadn’t returned yet.

As it grew later, Meng Qianshan’s anxiety reached its peak.

He hated how obedient he always was, but it’d been ingrained in him since childhood. He wasn’t the brightest, and His Highness had little fondness for him. However, he hadn’t been dismissed in the years since as he’d been assigned to the Prince of Jing by the late emperor.

Meng Qianshan had always been a cautious people pleaser. He followed the prince’s every command, hoping to make up for his lack of intelligence with agreeability. But now, this very obedience had led to trouble.

As he paced for what felt like the hundredth time, he heard the sound of a wheelchair approaching.

Meng Qianshan looked up belatedly to see Huo Wujiu already in front of him.

“What’s wrong?” Huo Wujiu asked.

“Madam, it’s all this stupid servant’s fault!” Meng Qianshan rambled in distress. “I let His Highness go out alone, and he still hasn’t come back...”

Huo Wujiu looked toward the door.

The rain wasn't heavy, but it'd been drizzling for a while without stopping.

"Very stupid, indeed," Huo Wujiu confirmed.

His tone was calm, but it carried an undeniable authority that made Meng Qianshan freeze, unable to speak. He cautiously looked at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu's gaze shifted from the rain outside the window to Meng Qianshan's worried face.

"It's so late, and you haven't sent anyone to look for him?" he asked, his voice stern. "What good is pacing around here?"

As if roused from a dream, Meng Qianshan quickly snapped into action again.

"You're right! How could I have been this negligent?!"

Just as he began to rush out into the rain himself, a servant came running in the opposite direction.

"Qianshan-gonggong, His Highness has returned!" the servant called out.

Meng Qianshan hurried to the corridor.

The servant ran up to him and gave his report, panting and breathless.

"His Highness has returned. Although the guards held an umbrella for him, he still got a little wet," the servant said.

"Where did His Highness go?" Meng Qianshan asked fretfully.

The servant hesitated, then spoke in a low voice.

“Someplace where he, um...had a bit too much to drink.”

Jiang Suizhou knew that this body was quite feeble and sickly, but he hadn't expected its alcohol tolerance to be this low as well.

After leaving the Ministry of Justice, he'd felt a heavy weight in his chest. He'd guessed that Ji You's imprisonment was connected to him, but it still shook him terribly to see that guess confirmed firsthand.

That was a living, breathing soul who was suffering needlessly. Ji You was a good man, a gifted and free-spirited master of poetry, and he didn't deserve this. Simply because of a few small acts of kindness toward the Prince of Jing, Ji You had been dragged into this mess along with him. Now his future was uncertain, and his life hung in the balance.

It was all because of Pang Shao.

Initially, Jiang Suizhou had seen Pang Shao as nothing more than a treacherous, corrupt official recorded alongside countless others in the history books. Now, he'd become the butcher wielding a knife, threatening everyone around him.

How naive Jiang Suizhou had been, thinking he could steer clear of him for three entire years and emerge unscathed.

He felt as if a stone were pressing down on his heart, making it hard to breathe.

He wanted to vent his frustration, but whom could he talk to about any aspect of this? And so he endured this burden silently until the carriage

passed Changping Street.

Changping Street was bustling with merchants and pedestrians, lively and vibrant. The aroma of food and wine wafted from the restaurants, and the crowd of ordinary people and vendors passing by offered Jiang Suizhou a brief vision of a world that was warm and peaceful, completely different from the cold, aristocratic atmosphere of the Prince of Jing's residence.

It was here that Jiang Suizhou ordered the carriage to stop and walked off on his own.

In this moment, he was desperate to shed the identity of the Prince of Jing and escape this world he'd been forced into. He yearned to return to the normal, unremarkable life he'd once had, and yet, he knew that even the ordinary world had no place for him anymore.

He wandered aimlessly through Changping Street, surrounded by people yet utterly isolated.

After walking for a while, Jiang Suizhou eventually found himself looking up at the flag of a vintner fluttering in the wind.

He entered the shop, ordered some wine, and drank alone until late into the night.

The wine wasn't strong—it was the usual southern apricot blossom wine, sweet and fragrant, not at all intoxicating. But when Jiang Suizhou stood, he felt dizzy and unsteady on his feet. Somehow, he was already drunk.

He steadied himself against the table.

Maybe being drunk wasn't so bad, really. Ever since his arrival, he'd been constantly on alert. It was exhausting.

He staggered out of the wine shop and slowly made his way back to the residence.

At some point, it had started raining outside, a mere light shower that he barely noticed. It wasn't until he reached the entrance of the residence that he realized someone had been holding an umbrella for him.

It was a guard he didn't recognize. When the guard noticed Jiang Suizhou looking at him, his legs trembled, and he almost collapsed to his knees.

Jiang Suizhou frowned and waved his hand dismissively.

Ah, of course. Inebriated as he was, he was still in the same place he was when he was sober. He was the fearsome Prince of Jing, a figure who struck dread into the hearts of all, even when nearly falling-down drunk.

A palanquin was brought over, but he spurned it in favor of walking across the wet stone pavement back to Anyin Hall on his own.

The moment he entered the courtyard, he saw Meng Qianshan running toward him through the rain.

"Your Highness!" Meng Qianshan's voice trembled with worry. "Where have you been? You scared your servant half to death..."

"Didn't you send people to follow me?" Jiang Suizhou responded hoarsely.

Meng Qianshan was startled, thinking the prince was about to reprimand him.

But before he could speak, Jiang Suizhou raised his hand.

He walked up the steps, then stopped under the corridor to turn and look back at Meng Qianshan.

“Don’t worry about me. Wait outside.”

Meng Qianshan could only nod obediently.

Jiang Suizhou pushed the door open, stepped inside, and leaned against the partition wall. He tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and took a few deep breaths to ground himself.

He would need to start figuring out how to clear Ji You’s name, as he’d sworn he would. But that was a task to be tackled tomorrow morning.

Right now, he just wanted to be alone for a while.

He stayed there for a moment, letting the haze of the alcohol dissipate a bit. Feeling slightly calmer now, he slowly opened his eyes again.

It was then that he realized someone was sitting in front of him, quietly watching.

Jiang Suizhou looked at the person and blinked in surprise, before smiling an unguarded, absolutely drunken smile as he realized who it was.

“You’re here,” he said lazily. “I’d forgotten.”

“Why did you drink so much?” Huo Wujiu asked.

“I didn’t drink that much,” he insisted, smiling and shaking his head. “I just have poor tolerance.”

Huo Wujiu frowned.

The man really had drunk beyond his limits.

His face was flushed, his gaze unfocused, and his robes were still damp. Although the upper half of his body hadn’t been caught in the rain, the hem of his robe and his trouser legs were soaking wet.

“Go change your clothes,” Huo Wujiu ordered.

“Oh,” Jiang Suizhou muttered, his thoughts jumbled.

He rubbed his temples, then braced himself against the partition to stand.

Unfortunately, he’d been leaning against the partition for too long. With the alcohol still fogging his mind and sapping his strength, his entire body felt weaker than ever. After just one step, his legs gave out, and he stumbled forward.

A second too late, Jiang Suizhou belatedly realized he was falling. In his current sluggish state, he couldn’t react in time.

He braced himself for the impact.

...It was unexpectedly warm and painless.

A pair of arms firmly embraced him. When he opened his eyes and blinked away some of the bleariness, the blurred mass in front of him resolved into Huo Wujiu’s handsome face, filling his field of vision. His dark, placid eyes fixed Jiang Suizhou with an appraising look at incredibly close range.

Huo Wujiu had caught him.

Jiang Suizhou, however, was far too drunk to register any of this as unusual or noteworthy in any way. Upon realizing that he was currently sprawled in Huo Wujiu’s arms, he merely gazed blankly back at him for a few seconds.

Then something seemed to click in his brain. He paused, as if he’d suddenly remembered something important, and then slowly asked the question on his mind.

“Do your legs still hurt today?”

Chapter 33

HUO WUJIU WAS BAFFLED.

The Prince of Jing was distraught about something to the point that he felt the need to go out and get drunk alone, and yet when he returned, he still had the energy to worry about whether Huo Wujiu's legs hurt.

He couldn't understand this man at all.

But now he was lying limply in Huo Wujiu's arms and staring at him with hazy, unfocused eyes. Huo Wujiu's heart instantly softened. He didn't stand a chance against such a pitiful sight.

It was as if he, too, had been intoxicated by the moment.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," he finally answered in a low voice.

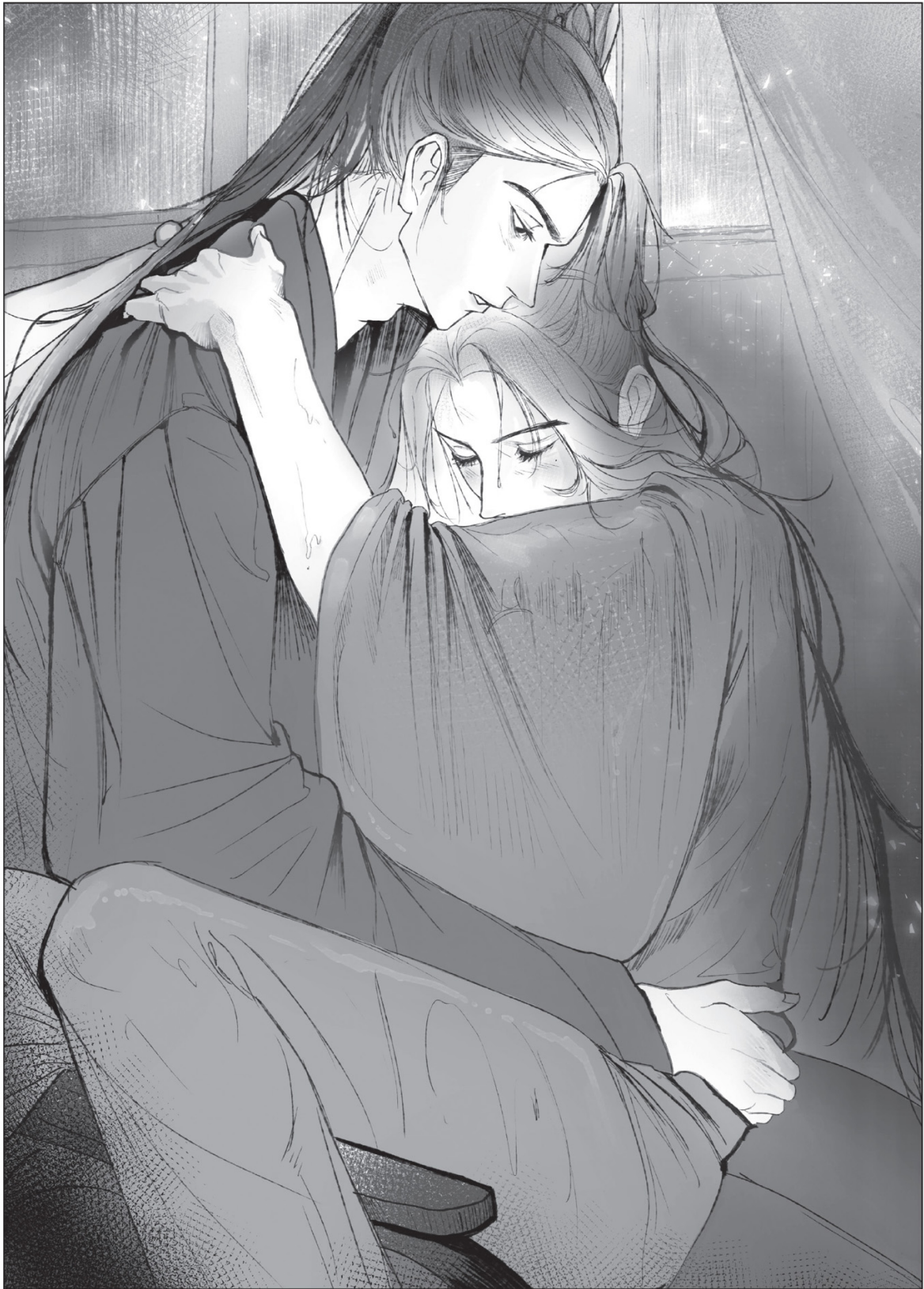
"But it's raining outside," Jiang Suizhou countered, still staring at him.

Huo Wujiu took a deep breath. For the first time, he realized how troublesome a drunk person could be.

And yet, he wasn't as frustrated as he probably should have been. Despite Jiang Suizhou's difficult and confusing behavior, Huo Wujiu didn't actually find him annoying at all.

"It is. That's why you're wet," he said patiently, his tone firm but gentle. "Now go change your clothes."

"Oh..." Jiang Suizhou pondered this for a moment. "I got caught in the rain."



Realizing the wisdom in Huo Wujiu's advice, Jiang Suizhou casually pressed a hand to his shoulder to brace himself. He proceeded to make a truly valiant effort to push himself upright, but he quickly flopped back down. He tried again and again, but it was futile. Once a drunk person lost their strength, it was difficult to regain it.

He scrabbled clumsily against Huo Wujiu, which only gave Jiang Suizhou the unfortunate appearance of an overly affectionate house pet rubbing against its owner.

Huo Wujiu's expression gradually darkened.

Then Jiang Suizhou felt a firm grip around his arm, and he was abruptly, single-handedly yanked upright.

Huo Wujiu guided him to the bed with one hand supporting him and the other steering his wheelchair.

"Change your clothes first," Huo Wujiu reminded the prince as he sat him down on the bed.

Jiang Suizhou had let him support his weight the entire way. His head was spinning, and simply sitting down on the bed left him disoriented and confused.

Despite this, he calmly followed Huo Wujiu's instructions.

"It's not that wet," he muttered softly as he undressed.

He clumsily removed his wet outer robe and tossed it to the ground, but this act drained all of his remaining energy. Listlessly, he slumped against the bedpost.

As Jiang Suizhou's inner robe was dry, meaning he was unlikely to catch a cold from it, Huo Wujiu didn't press him further. He reached down

for his wheels, fully intending to return to his daybed.

But then he heard a soft sigh.

It was quiet, but he could instantly sense the weariness and confusion the Prince of Jing was trying to conceal.

Huo Wujiu paused, hand frozen on the wheel. He turned his head to look at Jiang Suizhou.

He was leaning to the side, his forehead resting against the bed frame. His eyes were downcast, and he seemed to be lost in thought.

Beneath the warm, gentle glow of the lamplight, amid glittering jewels and luxurious silks, the Prince of Jing sat contained entirely within his domain of beauty and tranquility. And yet he seemed adrift, as though suspended in a void and completely untethered from his surroundings.

Huo Wujiu hesitated. He usually avoided meddling in others' affairs.

"...What's wrong?" he found himself asking anyway.

It took a moment for Jiang Suizhou to realize that Huo Wujiu was talking to him.

He opened his eyes. Under the candlelight, his gaze glistened wetly.

"I hurt someone," he said in a choked voice. "He was framed because of me."

Huo Wujiu knew who he was talking about, as he'd been present when Meng Qianshan rushed in that morning.

"It's not your fault," Huo Wujiu said.

Huo Wujiu had little personal experience with imperial court politics, as he had spent most of his time in the military, but he knew that innocent people were often sacrificed in these power struggles. It would have been

difficult for that man to remain unscathed regardless of Jiang Suizhou's influence.

But Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

"It is my fault," he insisted. "I must save him."

As he spoke, he seemed to remember something. Then he blinked, causing a tear to suddenly escape his long lashes and roll down his cheek.

As Huo Wujiu watched that tear slowly fall, he found himself in an unexpected fluster. His hands felt somewhat restless, and so he clenched them into tight fists atop his knees.

"If you want to save him, then save him," Huo Wujiu said plainly, brows furrowing. "Why are you crying?"

Despite his lack of familiarity with the Southern Jing court in particular, he knew that embezzlement cases were often flexible. After all, the flow of funds passed through many hands, and it wouldn't be too difficult to exonerate someone who'd been falsely accused.

A thought occurred to Huo Wujiu. "Do you not know how to save him?"

Jiang Suizhou shook his head and looked up at Huo Wujiu with watery eyes.

He didn't seem to notice that he was crying. He didn't even bother to wipe the tear from his face.

The pathetic sight made something tighten in Huo Wujiu's chest, and his heart started to race uncontrollably. It beat fiercely, one thump after another.

After staring at Huo Wujiu for a while, Jiang Suizhou sighed softly again.

“Huo Wujiu, when will your legs heal?”

Huo Wujiu allowed no expression to cross his face, but the tension in his jaw betrayed his emotions.

...Drunk people really do say nonsense, he thought to himself.

One moment, he was rambling about needing to save some man who was unrelated to anything else, and the next, he was going on about healing Huo Wujiu’s legs. Did he always feel the need to meddle in every little issue beneath the sun when he got drunk?

But when Huo Wujiu was the one suffering the meddling, he didn’t find it all that irritating.

To his own surprise, he had already grown accustomed to this foolish rabbit’s quirks, including his strange insistence on making him a priority.

They were both silent for a moment, and then Huo Wujiu raised his hand and roughly wiped the tear from Jiang Suizhou’s face with calloused fingers.

As if trying to erase all the worries that troubled him.

“Enough,” he said. “Go to sleep.”

Overall, Jiang Suizhou was a docile and fairly agreeable drunk, despite his dizziness and confusion. When Huo Wujiu told him to sleep, he

obediently crawled into bed and allowed Huo Wujiu to lower the bed curtains and extinguish the lights in the room.

As he lay in bed, Jiang Suizhou's mind was still a mess.

Wouldn't it be great if Huo Wujiu's legs healed right now? Then he could kill that bastard Pang Shao and change the course of history. Make that man's death come sooner.

With these jumbled and outlandish thoughts, Jiang Suizhou drifted off into a deep sleep.

When he woke up again, it was already bright outside.

The sunlight shone on his face, making him squint. He could feel a headache coming on, and when he sat up, he was still a little dizzy.

...He had definitely drunk too much yesterday.

His memory only stretched back to when he was still at the wine shop. The moment he stepped outside and the cold wind hit him, everything became a blur. Now, sitting on the bed and rubbing his head, he tried in vain to recall how he had made it back to the residence the previous night.

Just then, Meng Qianshan came by and noticed that Jiang Suizhou was already awake. He quickly instructed the maids to bring some hangover soup and then hurried over to attend to him.

"Your Highness, you're awake!"

Jiang Suizhou nodded, still rubbing his temples.

"Is Your Highness feeling unwell? It's still early, so you can sleep a little more," Meng Qianshan told him. "The Ministry of Rites is currently under investigation. Early this morning, someone came to report that Your Highness doesn't need to go to work today."

When he heard “Ministry of Rites,” Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

“I won’t be going back to sleep,” he said.

“Understood,” Meng Qianshan replied as he took the bowl of soup from a nearby maid and handed it to Jiang Suizhou. “But please, Your Highness, have some soup first.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded and took a few sips of the soup. It did seem to help clear his mind a little and sharpen his blurry vision, if only slightly.

In silence, he began to mull over his options regarding Ji You’s situation.

Ji You had been imprisoned because of him, and that meant he had to do something. But what, exactly? Right now, Jiang Suizhou was isolated and had little to rely on. In short, Pang Shao and his faction were strong, and he was weak. It was an uphill battle.

Thus, Jiang Suizhou needed to find some weak point he could exploit and strike at from the shadows. He had to catch his opponents off guard.

That being the case, he might have to make use of the other two “concubines” in his residence.

Gu Changyun was quite clever, and though his loyalty wasn’t assured, Jiang Suizhou had leverage over him. If Jiang Suizhou asked for his assistance, he would receive it.

And Xu Du had already quite convincingly affirmed his loyalty to the prince after the honest heart-to-heart conversation they’d had. Plus, the man was training elite soldiers for him.

If they struck from the shadows, they might prove useful...

The sound of a wheelchair approaching alerted him to Huo Wujiu coming out from the back room. Apparently he'd just finished washing up for breakfast, judging by the way damp strands of hair clung to his forehead, glistening in the sunlight.

Noticing Jiang Suizhou's gaze, Huo Wujiu turned and met his eyes calmly.

"Awake?" he asked casually.

Right... Jiang Suizhou had returned drunk last night and had no idea what he'd done. But Huo Wujiu had been in the room the whole time, so he must have seen everything.

Jiang Suizhou felt uneasy as he analyzed Huo Wujiu's expression.

He hadn't said anything he shouldn't have, right?

Perhaps it was just because the sunlight was nice today, but when he looked at Huo Wujiu's expressionless face, he felt that Huo Wujiu was in a good mood.

It seemed he hadn't provoked him last night, at least.

Jiang Suizhou let out a subtle sigh of relief. With Meng Qianshan's assistance, he changed his clothes and washed away the smell of alcohol, then sat down at the table feeling quite comfortable and in good spirits.

Huo Wujiu sat across from him.

After living together for a while, the two had naturally developed an unspoken understanding in these little things.

Sunlight streamed brightly through the window as they quietly shared breakfast, a small moment of tranquility.

Because of the alcohol, Jiang Suizhou didn't have much of an appetite and only ate half a bowl of porridge before putting down his chopsticks.

Meng Qianshan quickly stepped forward, handing him a copper basin with which to wash his hands.

"Your Highness, will you be going to the ministry office or the study later?"

Jiang Suizhou pondered for a moment, remembering his plans for the morning.

There was no time to waste.

"Neither," he said. "Send someone to Gu Changyun's room now, and tell him I'll be visiting him soon. Have him prepare for my arrival."

Meng Qianshan's gaze darted from Jiang Suizhou to Huo Wujiu and back a few times.

Already? This early in the morning?!

He cautiously acknowledged the order and retreated.

Jiang Suizhou picked up the teacup on the table and lifted it to his lips.

But before he could take a sip, a sharp *clang!* interrupted the movement. It wasn't loud, but it was so sudden that it startled Jiang Suizhou and made his hand tremble briefly.

He looked up and saw that Huo Wujiu had roughly put down his bowl. His face was absolutely devoid of expression as he turned his wheelchair and exited the room without a word.

...Was he done with breakfast already?

Jiang Suizhou looked at the bowl Huo Wujiu had left.

Huo Wujiu usually had a good appetite and never wasted food. But today, a large portion of porridge remained in his bowl, and the main dishes on the table had only been half eaten.

Surprised, he looked around to see where Huo Wujiu had gone. It seemed he'd entered the bedroom.

Just a moment ago, he'd thought Huo Wujiu was in a good mood. Why was he suddenly angry now? Had someone offended him?

Chapter 34

JIANG SUIZHOU WANTED TO ASK Huo Wujiu what was wrong, but the words stuck in his throat.

The man's expression was permanently stern, after all. He always looked pretty grumpy, which made it nearly impossible to gauge his mood reliably. What if he wasn't even angry about anything at all, and Jiang Suizhou ended up asking pointlessly?

That would be incredibly awkward.

So, Jiang Suizhou sneaked another glance or two at Huo Wujiu and then ended up swallowing his words.

After breakfast, he changed his clothes and headed straight to Gu Changyun's courtyard.

As usual, Gu Changyun and Xu Du were both waiting in the room. The two were about to stand and bow when Jiang Suizhou waved his hand and sat down at the head of the table.

"Sit," he said coolly.

The two exchanged a glance and sat down in the chairs beside him.

"Yesterday, Minister Ji was arrested for embezzlement. Both of you know this already, correct?" Jiang Suizhou said.

They nodded.

"Your Highness need not worry," Gu Changyun said, smiling.

"Minister Ji has never taken sides, and despite our attempts to persuade

him, he remained uncooperative. Even if he's dealt with by Pang Shao, it doesn't harm us. Your Highness doesn't need to take it to heart."

Jiang Suizhou locked eyes with him.

"I want to save him," he said bluntly.

Gu Changyun hadn't expected to hear that sort of declaration. He stared at the prince in shock for a moment but quickly recovered.

"Your Highness is kindhearted. Your subordinate is naturally pleased. However..."

"Xu Du," Jiang Suizhou suddenly interrupted.

"Your Highness?" Xu Du replied reflexively.

"You haven't told him anything yet, have you?" Jiang Suizhou prodded.

It took a second for Xu Du to understand what he meant.

"Without Your Highness's orders, your subordinate dared not speak recklessly," he answered tactfully.

At that, Jiang Suizhou nodded and turned back to Gu Changyun.

"Gu Changyun, now that you've joined my side, it's safer for your grandmother and younger sister to remain where they are."

"Your Highness...?" Gu Changyun trailed off, and the smile on his face slowly faded.

Jiang Suizhou looked up and gazed seriously at Gu Changyun as he continued speaking.

"I'm different from him, so let me tell you outright: I have no intention of holding your family hostage. But since they're already living

there, there's no need for them to move out. That said... If you want to see them, you are free to go to their courtyard at any time from now on."

Gu Changyun paused, overwhelmed.

He'd never told anyone this, but ever since his family had been coerced into the residence by the Prince of Jing, he hadn't had the chance to see them even once.

After a moment, he looked up at Jiang Suizhou with red, watery eyes and a genuine smile.

"...Your Highness is truly kind and wishes to save him. Your subordinate will naturally do his utmost."

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

Both of his subordinates were sharp, so there was no need to spell things out completely.

The two of them had already figured out he wasn't the original owner of this body. By coming clean and doing damage control on the original prince's manipulative tactics, Jiang Suizhou was demonstrating that the current Prince of Jing deserved Gu Changyun's trust.

He couldn't take back the cruel leverage he had over this man, but he could at least use it to prove his sincerity while also taking care of Gu Changyun's family. After all, Gu Changyun was irrevocably tied to him. At this point, there was no turning back. This arrangement was the best outcome for all involved.

"It's not only because I'm kindhearted," Jiang Suizhou said frankly, seeing that Gu Changyun understood. "Pang Shao now holds absolute control. Clearly, he can take down any official he likes with little effort."

He looked at both of them with a solemn expression.

“If we let him kill Ji You today, who will it be tomorrow? Right now, many officials are counting on me for protection. If I fail to protect even one or two of them now, I risk losing their trust and support.”

After a pause, he continued.

“Naturally, I also think that saving one is better than none. We can’t let Pang Shao keep getting his way.”

Hearing this, Xu Du frowned slightly.

“It’s good that Your Highness thinks this way,” he said. “But...does Your Highness have a plan?”

Gu Changyun nodded in agreement.

“The Ministry of Rites also has members of Pang Shao’s faction. It’s easy to fabricate evidence of embezzlement and pin it on Minister Ji. But if we wish to exonerate him, we currently lack a clear starting point.”

“It’s easy to pin it on him, but the whereabouts of the embezzled funds...” Jiang Suizhou mused. “Presumably that should also be investigated?”

“Of course,” Gu Changyun said with a nod. “But according to the laws of Great Jing, even if the whereabouts of the embezzled funds can’t be traced, the criminal must still be punished.”

Jiang Suizhou pondered for a moment.

This lined up with his understanding of the historical record. There were countless corruption cases documented over the years, many of which were resolved quickly and with minimal evidence.

So, as someone from the future, how could he leverage his knowledge against his opponent?

Jiang Suizhou fell silent for a long time, and the expressions of his two subordinates were also grave. For a while, no one spoke.

Finally, Xu Du broke the silence.

“Now that the case has been made, the only way to save Minister Ji is to find a scapegoat. But...we can’t frame an innocent person.”

A scapegoat?

Suddenly, Jiang Suizhou’s eyes lit up as he found himself struck by a flash of inspiration.

The court would have a hard time tracking down where that money Ji You supposedly embezzled actually ended up. Tracing these things could be quite a daunting task, so perhaps he could help them figure that out?

He’d studied the history of the Jing dynasty extensively, after all. He didn’t know every official’s entire biography by heart, but he was familiar enough with what each of them had done—including who had engaged in corruption and embezzlement. A rough plan began to take shape in his mind.

It shouldn’t be hard to find someone from the Ministry of Rites who’d embezzled a large sum and deserved a bit of heat. If they steered the Ministry of Justice’s focus toward that individual, Ji You could end up cleared of all charges.

“That’s an excellent idea,” he said.

“Does Your Highness already have someone in mind?” Xu Du asked, surprised.

Jiang Suizhou just smiled.

Of course. Not only was this individual a good candidate, but he was also someone who had walked right into the line of fire all on his own.

Chen Ti.

He'd certainly benefited financially from his many attempts to curry favor with Pang Shao. Coincidentally, just before Jiang Suizhou traveled through time, a colleague had written a thesis on corruption during the late Jing period. He distinctly remembered seeing at least one mention of Chen Ti and the numerous large mansions he had bought in Lin'an.

And wasn't he the one who'd thoughtfully invited Huo Wujiu to that flower-viewing banquet? Perhaps Jiang Suizhou should repay his kindness by inviting the Ministry of Justice to a viewing of those mansions Chen Ti owned.

Jiang Suizhou spent the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon going over the plan with his advisors. After finalizing their strategy and ensuring there were no loopholes, the three of them took a break and had a meal together.

During the meal, Xu Du looked curiously at Jiang Suizhou.

"Your Highness, how do you know so much about Chen Ti's assets?"

Jiang Suizhou smiled faintly.

"I have my ways," he said lightly.

He couldn't very well tell them that he had come from a thousand years in the future and had specifically studied them, could he?

However, hearing this, Gu Changyun laughed.

"Why even ask? You've read fairy tales, haven't you?" he said, grinning. "People like His Highness always have some strange abilities that normal people don't. I see nothing unusual about this."

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but smile at that. He playfully tapped the back of Gu Changyun's hand with the thicker end of his chopsticks.

The three of them bantered for a while until Jiang Suizhou suddenly went quiet. He thought for a moment, then spoke.

"Actually, there's one more thing."

The two looked at him.

"I want to find a way to treat Huo Wujiu's injured legs."

Xu Du and Gu Changyun exchanged a brief glance. Neither of them spoke for a while.

"Your Highness...why is that?" Xu Du finally ventured.

"Pang Shao's influence runs deep, and the emperor is an ignorant fool. But I don't think we are in the position to bring them down," Jiang Suizhou said carefully. "That will be Northern Liang's doing."

There was another short but heavy silence.

"Although that's true," Gu Changyun said, "has Your Highness considered your own situation?"

Jiang Suizhou looked at him quizzically.

"Pang Shao is an enemy, but Northern Liang is also an enemy," Gu Changyun continued. "How can Your Highness be sure that Huo Wujiu will

kill Pang Shao but not you?”

Jiang Suizhou was momentarily at a loss for words.

He had been thinking about this since that morning. He knew that everything in Southern Jing would be destroyed by Huo Wujiu in three years' time, but he didn't want to spend all that time waiting quietly while skirmishing with Pang Shao.

He wanted to shorten that time.

But, as Gu Changyun had said, what guarantee did he have that Huo Wujiu wouldn't kill him?

He couldn't think of a compelling reason, but somehow, he couldn't shake the feeling that he just...wouldn't. In fact, the very thought of Huo Wujiu killing him seemed outright ridiculous.

Was it because Huo Wujiu had been so amiable toward him recently?

“There's still time,” Jiang Suizhou said vaguely. “As long as we can cure him, I can guarantee it.”

He had never been a gambling man, but with those words, he knew he was making a very risky wager.

And yet, like a true gambler, he felt certain that he wouldn't lose.

He looked calmly at the two men in front of him.

After a long silence, Gu Changyun was the first to sigh.

“Since Your Highness is so certain, then your subordinate will also trust you,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou nodded slowly.

“Then, our next task will be to find a renowned physician to treat him,” Gu Changyun added. “But if we're going to search the world for a

doctor, we'll need a viable cover story for it."

Jiang Suizhou wholeheartedly agreed.

"Your subordinate has an idea," Gu Changyun said.

Jiang Suizhou nodded, signaling him to continue.

"Your Highness's poor health works in our favor now. We can claim that the incident at the Ministry of Rites left you deeply worried, and then you were caught in the rain yesterday on top of that. Thus, you fell ill a few days after returning home. That gives us a solid reason to seek out a doctor."

He was truly a sharp-minded man.

Jiang Suizhou nodded, thought for a moment, and then frowned.

"But if we say that, I'll need to actually fall ill. The emperor and Pang Shao are watching me closely, and I guarantee they'll send someone to investigate."

Gu Changyun smiled.

"Your Highness, have you forgotten where this subordinate came from?"

Jiang Suizhou was stunned. "The brothel?"

Gu Changyun nodded.

"This subordinate picked up many unconventional tricks there, including some interesting medical formulas. Though none of them can cure an illness, they can create the appearance of illness. I know of a medicine that can make someone seem so convincingly sick that it would fool any normal physician."

Jiang Suizhou was quite surprised.

“Such a thing exists?” he asked incredulously. “If that’s the case, then this plan is foolproof. When the physicians here inevitably fail to cure me, we can post notices seeking a doctor. If the two of you can screen the applicants, we might find someone who can cure Huo Wujiu.”

Gu Changyun nodded.

“However, if that’s the plan...” He paused.

“What is it?” Jiang Suizhou looked at him.

“It will take time to prepare the medicine,” he explained. “And even more to apply it—you’ll have to soak in a tub to thoroughly absorb it and receive the effects...”

Gu Changyun gave Jiang Suizhou a playful, suggestive smile before he continued.

“In that case, Your Highness will have to spend the next couple of nights in my room.”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

*After the Disabled God of War
Became My Concubine*

VOLUME 2

**CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY**

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

JIANG SUIZHOU 江随舟 (“WITH THE BOAT”): The subject of transmigration. Became the unpopular Prince of Jing, who was forced to take Huo Wujiu as his concubine.

HUO WUJIU 霍无咎 (“FAULTLESS”): The Marquis of Dingbei. A captured and maimed general of the Liang dynasty, forced to marry Jiang Suizhou.

PRINCE OF JING’S RESIDENCE

MENG QIANSHAN 孟潜山: Head eunuch of the residence.

GU CHANGYUN 顾长筠: One of the Prince of Jing’s concubines.

XU DU 徐渡: Another of the Prince of Jing’s concubines.

SUN YUAN 孙远: A young servant in the residence.

JING IMPERIAL COURT

JIANG SHUNHENG 江舜恒: Emperor You of Jing, the last emperor of the Southern Jing dynasty. The Prince of Jing’s brother.

PANG SHAO 庞绍: An upper-first rank official and the maternal uncle of Jiang Shunheng.

JI YOU 季攸: The Minister of Rites and the Prince of Jing’s superior.

JI HONGCHENG 纪泓承: A military official. Lou Yue is his patron.

LOU YUE 娄钺: A famous general of Southern Jing. Was close friends with Huo Wujiu's father.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

FAMILY

GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer.

HUANGXIONG: A word meaning “imperial brother.” A form of address for older male relatives of a similar age in the imperial family, usually meant for the emperor's elder brothers.

WUDI: A word meaning “fifth younger brother.” Literally refers to the order in which the addressee was born in the family.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to

pronunciation of select character names from *After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING:

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Jiāng Suízhōu

Jiāng: Ji as in **jeep**, āng as in **sung**

Suí as in sway

Zhōu: Zh as in **suds**, ou as in **oat**

Huò Wújiù

Huò: H as in **hood**, uò as in **warm**

Wú as in ooh

Jiù: J as in **jeep**, iù as in **yo-yo**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sheep** and **s** in **silk**

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **charm**

C: **ts** as in **pants**

Z: **z** as in **zoom**

S: **s** as in **silk**

Ch: **ch** as in **charm**

Zh: **dg** as in **dodge**

Sh: **sh** as in **shave**

G: hard **g** as in **graphic**

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

Ie: **ye** as in **yes**

UO: **war** as in **warm**

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have dozens or even a hundred.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: A series of examinations designed to select the brightest of the populace to serve in the court as officials. They were separated into three main stages: entry, provincial, then palace, focusing heavily on Confucian doctrine and literature. Passing the exam was a great honor: The top scorer, or Principal Graduate, of each exam would return home showered in accolades. It was the only method through which someone could become part of the aristocracy.

RANK SYSTEM: For much of Chinese history, officials were divided into ranks which denoted their status within the court, with upper-first rank being the highest. Courtesy demanded that lower-rank officials show appropriate respect to those ranked above them.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how

blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

About the Author

Liu Gou Hua is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City. Notable works include *I Became the Brother of a Whump Novel's Heroine* and *After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine*. Her most popular title has accumulated over 450,000 bookmarks on Jinjiang and has been adapted into a well-received audio drama under the same name. It has been fully published in simplified Chinese print under the name “Lingering Clouds.”

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] A euphemism for homosexuality, originating in the Han dynasty.

[2] Yao (妖): a subset of creatures from Chinese mythology said to have shape-shifting and hypnotic abilities; often depicted as being malevolent, seductive, or capricious.

[3] My Fair Princess is a Chinese historical drama that first aired in 1998, set in the 18th-century Qing dynasty. Although based on historical events, the show took many artistic liberties.

Chapter 2

[4] Title of address for eunuchs.

Chapter 5

[5] Hu (笏): a long, narrow tablet carried by court officials as marks of rank, required for formal appearances before the emperor.

[6] Posthumous names reflect a ruler's achievements and reign. While most are laudatory, some serve as a condemnation. The character for You (幽) is associated with darkness and the netherworld, while Ling (灵) is

associated with superstition and the supernatural, which is slightly less negative.

[7] Wudi (五弟): “fifth brother.”

[8] Huangxiong (皇兄): “imperial brother.”

Chapter 8

[9] Gege (哥哥): affectionate term for an older brother.

Chapter 10

[10] Weiqi is the Chinese name for the board game also known as “Go.” It is often compared to chess due to the objective of capturing the territory of the opposing player, as well as its high level of abstract strategy.

Chapter 11

[11] The vital energy believed to circulate through the human body.

Chapter 20

[12] A Taoist deity depicted as an ugly, burly man. In folklore, Zhong Kui passed the imperial examinations with top honors, only to have his title stripped from him because of his appearance. Enraged by this, he smashed his head against the gate until he died and eventually became the king of ghosts.

Chapter 25

[\[13\]](#) Channels in the body through which qi is believed to flow.

有一人，愿意缚住手脚，丢
掉剑刃， equal 重地站在敌人
手中，就是因为答应对他，要
保护他。

刘——

Now here was someone who willingly chose to bind
his own hands and feet and toss away his sword,
who intended to stay at Jiang Suizhou's side
no matter the personal cost, humiliation and all,
simply because he'd sworn to protect him.

Liu Gou Hua

THE FAN-FAVORITE TRANSMIGRATION DANMEI
MAKES ITS ENGLISH DEBUT!

A Professor Turned Prince, A General Turned Concubine

An outrageous thesis has just hit the desk of esteemed history professor Jiang Suizhou. Dubiously sourced, it tells the story of the General Huo Wujiu, a man who was captured, incapacitated, and forced to serve as concubine to his enemy's brother—the cut-sleeve prince who enjoyed men in his bed. For three grueling years, the general lived as a prisoner until he escaped and sought vengeance against his tormentors.

Convinced the story is pure fiction, Jiang Suizhou brands the thesis a failure, that is, until he wakes up as the cut-sleeve prince himself!

Now, stuck lording over his concubine and prisoner Huo Wujiu, Jiang Suizhou only has one option to avoid facing the general's future wrath: Ally himself with Huo Wujiu. Still, this strategy could backfire if Huo Wujiu were to get the wrong idea about his intentions.

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